

Study on the Influence of Attitudes and Beliefs—How Others’ Opinions Will Trigger Hatred

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Keywords: Attitudes, Beliefs, Hatred

Abstract: This paper focuses on the psychological concepts of attitudes and beliefs to explore the formation of opinion, the conflicts in people's lives that arise from anger and those that arise from hatred, and the reasons for the aversion to others’ opinions. People are likely to see their own perceptions based on attitudes and beliefs as truth, which is an important reason for hatred. The paper focuses on the causes and effects of hate formation, using examples of individual and collective hate at both the public and political levels, from which it explores the role of psychology as a guide to curbing angry hate and forming good interpersonal relationships. The next question we should urgently respond to is what to do about hateful attitudes and beliefs in our society given the threat to others’ lives and wellbeing that hatred poses.

1. Introduction

When we take a psychology-informed approach to how attitudes and beliefs function, we understand that it is not reasonable for us to hate others for their opinions. Rather, this approach teaches us that attitudes and beliefs fulfill a primordial need for a meaningful worldview and sense of self that all share. Similarly, hatred can be understood psychologically as an emotion that aims not at changing, but ultimately at eliminating or destroying its target. By understanding how our own and others’ attitudes and belief systems as well as emotions work, we can begin to ask *what they do for people* instead of disliking or even hating another for having certain opinions. This approach not only makes more sense, that is, is more informed and healthier in psychological terms, but it also combats the urge to hate. Moreover, it is more effective at persuading people to potentially change their beliefs and attitudes when these themselves may be “hateful.”

2. Definitions of Attitudes and Beliefs

2.1. Attitudes

First it is important to provide definitions of the major psychological concepts that I will discuss in this essay. Opinions can be understood through the psychological concepts of attitudes and beliefs, which are quite different from how psychology understands the emotion of hatred. Oskamp and Wesley (2005) note that attitudes are essentially a person’s evaluation of something, that is, one’s previously acquired information on something makes up people’s thoughts and feelings about it [1]. They serve various vital functions and at their core: they help people to first have a basic understanding of the world around them and also of other individuals. Because attitudes enable people to establish a system for determining their values, they are a major component of personal identities. When one has an attitude toward something, one is able to know *who* they are and *what* they need to live.

2.2. Beliefs

Beliefs, according to Oskamp and Wesley (2005), are a corollary to attitudes: “a person’s ‘basic truths’ about the world, about other people, and about himself or herself” [1]. Psychology classifies beliefs in part based on their malleability or their resistance to change: According to a study cited

by Oskamp and Wesley (2005):

Primitive beliefs that are shared with other individuals [are] most resistant to change, followed by primitive beliefs that are not widely shared. Next in resistance to change [comes] beliefs about authority. Next [comes] derived beliefs. Finally, the easiest to change [are] inconsequential beliefs concerning matters of taste [1].

3. The Influence of Attitudes and Beliefs

Therefore, a psychological understanding of how attitudes and beliefs function, when actually applied to people's lives, should be capable of curbing conflict. Right now, when people interact, they exchange their attitudes and belief systems with one another. Given the sheer variety of these and how fundamental they are to our personhood, the exchange of different attitudes and belief systems for some, especially in the public domain and on a mass level, can lead to conflict. Psychology differentiates between conflict that is felt as anger versus conflict that is experienced as hatred. As Fischer, Halperin, Canetti, and Jasini (2018) write:

Hate is different from anger, because an anger target is appraised as someone whose behavior can be influenced and changed. A hate target, on the contrary, implies appraisals of the other's malevolent nature and malicious intent. Hate is a stable perception of a person or group and thus the incapability to change the extremely negative characteristics attributed to the target of hate [2].

This is to say that people may not merely consider their attitudes and beliefs to be opinions. Instead, they may believe them to be "truth" which are impermeable to change by anyone at any time. Moreover, there is usually a dichotomous component of right or wrong when it comes to these truths. That means that challenges to one's opinions can elicit hatred, because any difference amounts to deviating from the only perceived right way to think or feel about something. It amounts to not only being wrong, but bad. It is clear that this understanding of our thoughts and feelings is not psychologically-informed.

One example of this is that sometimes hate is directed against a certain group of people based on people's associations in daily life, which means that "hate" is not precisely toward someone's opinion in itself. Studying the rise in partisan antipathy in Political Science is an example of this that shows us that people are unable to judge things rationally and objectively because of their original attitudes and beliefs. According to Doherty (2014), it is difficult for us to clarify the causal relationship between belonging to one political party and believing that the other's policies are wrong, not only politically but also morally [3]. Likewise, a look at hate crimes in the United States, according to Fischer, Halperin, Canetti, and Jasini (2018), shows that "An important feature of hate crimes is that the victims generally have not done anything specific: they are terrorized for who they are, not for what they have done. This makes the victims feel powerless and unable to control the situation because changing their behavior or attitudes would not necessarily help" [4].

4. Mechanism of Hatred

A psychologically-informed understanding of how hatred works, therefore, would also contribute to curbing people's hatred toward others for their opinions. This is apparent in psychologists' study of hateful attitudes like homophobia. On this the psychologist Gregory M. Herek (1986) says, "Many people express homophobic attitudes because doing so helps them to say who they are, to receive support from people who are important to them, and to avoid anxiety associated with unacceptable parts of themselves" [5]. These examples of hatred generated politically, on a macro-level, show that like attitudes and beliefs, hatred can generate a sense of identity as well as fulfill basic social needs like social belonging. Despite this, Herek also says that hate does not actually succeed in eliminating its target, but actually the opposite: "Homophobia, ironically, affirms the reality of lesbians and gay men, because you cannot hate and fear something that does not exist". When one hates others for their opinions, one fails to understand that they wish to eliminate others for having the same needs they themselves have. We see once again that given

hatred's paradoxical qualities, it really does not make sense to hate others for their opinions. However, the next question we should urgently respond to is what to do about hateful attitudes and beliefs in our society given the threat to others' lives and wellbeing that hatred poses.

More specifically, we can ask, what could our approach be instead when dealing with differences in attitudes and beliefs? Arthur Brooks (2019), the former president of the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative Washington, D.C., think tank, shows us that most political hatred is in fact manipulation by dominant powers who benefit off of people's charged emotions in what he calls the "outrage industrial complex":

We're being manipulated largely by the media, by politics, even by academia...where we're told that it's OK to hate our enemies. There's very clear data that ninety-three percent of Americans hate how divided we have become. That doesn't mean that we agree with each other. On the contrary, we shouldn't agree with each other, because we have a competition of ideas. That's a good thing. But the other seven percent, they're getting rich and powerful and famous or just getting satisfaction and followers on social media by saying it's okay to hate each other.

According to Brooks, it is not necessarily wrong to want to change others' beliefs or attitudes, despite knowing how psychologically difficult this might be. Seen in political terms, this is considered a feature of a thriving democracy. Likewise, as stated above, people's attitudes of hate are dangerous and should be subject to change. However, it is wrong and also nonsensical to try to persuade others with hatred. Instead, one way to combat the "outrage industrial complex" is to practice radical empathy with those who see things differently than ourselves. Part of radical empathy, which according to Peter Laughter (2015), a TEDx lecturer, is a practice, is being able to understand how attitudes and beliefs work in others and ourselves, while also knowing they are not all of who we are. "In moments of conflict, [radical empathy] allows you to see the person as a whole" [6]. The same TEDx lecturer concludes that people's default state is connection, and it is actually anything that disrupts that connection that creates conflict. That means that our capacity for sharing experiences is greater than our capacity for fighting over them, and we often fight precisely because we are frustrated that we are not connecting. The way to get around conflicts in opinions is not necessarily to love those opinions, but to practice love toward the people who have them. One way to do this is through forming a political consciousness that makes us aware of how hatred is mobilized for the benefit of the powerful, as Brooks says, which makes the need for radical empathy even an even more urgent issue.

5. Conclusion

Humans share more than they differ on. We occupy the planet at the same time; we worry about the same fundamental things: our loved ones, our past, our future, and so forth. It seems then that difference, and particularly hatred over difference, is something that is socially constructed, rather than being the natural state of things. Sociologist Karen E. Fields and historian Barbara J. Fields, for example, turn on its head the commonly held belief "that racism grows from a perception of human difference," instead showing that race and therefore racism is created through race craft, a process that is pervasive in "economic doctrine, politics, and everyday thinking" (*Verso Books*, 2022). What then if economics, politics, and everyday life were informed by an understanding of psychology that promoted unity and connection rather than division and hatred? My guess is that our everyday thinking would grasp that we are all equally struggling to make sense of life and our world, and that we can no more harshly judge others for how they do this than ourselves.

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