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## Beliefism: why birds of a feather shouldn't flock together

*When you surround yourself only with people who share similar beliefs to yours, you're discriminating against those who disagree. Paul Dolan writes that this is beliefism, an "ism" that keeps us from making good decisions at home or in the workplace. He writes that less beliefist people are, overall, happier. They have broader horizons and stronger and more fulfilling relationships.*

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Would you conclude that someone who only had friends with the same set of beliefs as their own was less tolerant than someone who had friends with different beliefs? What if they believed in the sanctity of marriage, say, and refused to be friends with someone who believed in polyamory? If you surround yourself only with people who share similar views to yours, then you are, by definition, discriminating against those who disagree. This is *beliefism*. The more you discriminate, the more beliefist you are.

*Beliefism* can be seen as a strong form of intolerance. Someone who is beliefist is not only intolerant of people and perspectives that are different to theirs. They also actively avoid people who disagree. A beliefist may pass someone over for a job, say, because they only want to hire people who share similar beliefs on issues that matter to them. Logically, there is no difference between racism, sexism, classism, beliefism or any other "ism" in this regard.

Clearly, we can quite legitimately choose to be intolerant of people who are themselves intolerant. And we are certainly under no obligation to be friends with someone who is racist, sexist, classist – or beliefist. There is no moral value to the claim that some of my best friends are racist. But when we use someone's (different but not abhorrent) beliefs on one issue to completely dismiss them, and all their other beliefs, we are guilty of using a tiny fraction of information about that person to judge their whole character.

My next book will be about beliefism. And how to reduce it. I am strongly of the view that the world would be a better place if there were less beliefism and more tolerance of different perspectives and the people that hold them. There would be less conflict and more economic and social progress. Unlike a lot of what has been written about political polarisation, it is not my ambition to reduce extreme views. Indeed, I have no intention of changing your mind about anything except how you interact with those who have different beliefs.

Well-functioning societies embrace a wide range of perspectives. Some of the most profound advances in knowledge have come from those who were thought to have extreme, even crazy, views at the time. Consider the monumental shifts brought about by Galileo Galilei's heliocentric view of our universe and Albert Einstein's theory of relativity. These and other figures underline the importance of outlier perspectives in enhancing our collective wisdom.



*All readers of LSE Blogs have this preference, right?*



Moreover, there is also some evidence to suggest that economic and social progress requires that the consensus gets challenged from time to time in stable democracies that would otherwise face the risk of capture from special interest groups. This view has not gone uncontested, but it does alert us to the potential need for shocks to the system to loosen the grip of vested interests.

We currently face radical uncertainty such as around artificial intelligence, and this makes it even more important that we reduce beliefism and listen to the outliers. Can anyone confidently claim to know what's going to happen next with generative AI? It makes no sense to ignore anyone's views about it. Decision-making in households, corporations and institutions could all be enhanced by a greater willingness to listen to different perspectives and people.

By being less beliefist at a personal level and on a day-to-day basis, you might be a better partner or parent, or a more effective buddy or boss. Well-rounded individuals accept and respect different perspectives and people. Being less beliefist will broaden your horizons, so that you are smarter, and have stronger and more fulfilling relationships. Overall, you'll be happier.

But perhaps not immediately, as you adjust to listening to different perspectives outside of your comfort zone. Being less beliefist can be quite a challenge. We need to overcome the natural human tendency to favour those who agree with us and the psychological need for certainty and

consistency, which can make it hard for us to update our beliefs, including our views of other people and groups, even when faced with compelling evidence to do so.

We are drawn towards forming, and being in, groups in all walks of life where we can all nod along in agreement with another rather than shake our heads in disagreement. And it's generally easier to have someone or another group to blame for how sh\*t things are or for how you feel. There's a whole lot of cognitive, emotional, and social tide of beliefism to swim against if we are to become more tolerant.

In groups dominated by groupthink, alternative viewpoints or criticisms are often suppressed, either actively by group leaders or passively by group members themselves who self-censor out of fear of going against the grain. We are more likely to have friends who have similar characteristics to ours, even if sometimes we are unaware of surrounding ourselves with people like us. This phenomenon permeates every aspect of our social lives, including work relationships and the networks we build for support and advice.

Workplaces can implement diversity training programmes as part of the onboarding process. New employees would participate in workshops that simulate various intergroup scenarios, encouraging them to engage with and learn from the diverse perspectives of their coworkers. But we are not going to become more diverse and inclusive by simply willing ourselves so. With the best will in the world, homophily will dominate and so we need to design environments that encourage and reward genuine cognitive diversity.

So, the only effective way to reduce beliefism is to make it easier for us to be less beliefist without having to think too hard about it. Even then, "tolerance by design" isn't going to get us very far if we approach every situation with a closed mind. So, at a minimum, becoming less beliefist requires that you at least have a weak preference for being so – a preference that will align with the fact that there are individual and societal benefits from reducing beliefism. All readers of *LSE Blogs* have this preference, right?

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## About the author



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