

## The 'Illusion of Explanatory Depth' is a Common Trap in *How We Think*

The issue of what we confidently believe we know, but in fact do not, is a pervasive and serious one today across a whole range of domains from politics to personal life.

This is known as the 'illusion of explanatory depth'.

The illusion that we understand something complicated is revealed when people are asked for, or required to give, an explanation of what it is they purport to understand.

They then discover that in fact their understanding is not what they believed it to be and, and on further reflection become aware that we were presuming, so they revise their earlier confidence to a more realistic degree.

This adjustment towards realism, modesty, and decency is good for the person and society as people act on their 'illusions of explanatory depth' in arenas that matter to others.

The study summarised below - **an investigation of how *asking people to explain complex policies in detail both diminishes the illusion of explanatory depth and leads to attitudes that are more moderate*** - demonstrates this widespread illusion.

---

### Political Extremism is Supported by an 'Illusion of Understanding'

---

In our contemporary world, many people hold strong opinions or political positions on the belief that they have a deep understanding although, in fact, they remain relatively ignorant about the actual workings of complicated policies and political issues.

This illusion has created citizens who hold extreme views without knowing the facts.

**Therefore, confronting how much we really know is an important part of confronting the current crises of the world in which we are living.**

The investigators explored how confidence in strong positions on policies is reduced by *having to explain* how those policies work and this lead to more moderate political views.

The investigators were asking two questions:

1. Do people really have unjustified confidence in their understanding of how complex policies work?
2. Does the illusion of understanding contribute to attitude polarization? (P. 939)

They conducted 3 Experiments with different sets of participants for each experiment (198, 141 and 101 respectively).<sup>1</sup>

### Experiment 1

Examined the impact of *having to generate an explanation* of how a government policy worked on a participant's position on that policy.

- Participants were asked to rate how well they understood six political policies.
- Participants were then asked to *explain* how two of the six policies worked (to give 'mechanistic explanations').
- Participants were, finally, asked to rate their understanding again.

**Results:** Positions became more moderate following attempts to explain policies.

### Experiment 2

Replicated Experiment 1 but asked participants to *enumerate reasons* for their position instead of asking participants to explain how policies worked.

The investigators explain that *reasons* do not necessarily entail 'mechanistic explanations' and may appeal to "a rule, a value, or a feeling" (P. 942).

**Results:** Enumerating reasons did not lead to any change in position extremity.

### Experiment 3

Examined whether the moderating function of 'mechanistic explanations' investigated in Experiment 1 affected political decisions.

- Participants rated their position on a given policy
- Participants then provided either an *explanation* of how the policy worked **or** *reasons* for why they support it
- Participants finally were asked whether they wanted, or did not want, to donate to a relevant advocacy group.

**Results:**

- Participants who generated *explanations* were less likely to donate.
- Enumerating *reasons* did not affect participants inclination to donate.

### Findings

- Attempting *explanations* of how something works makes the complexity more apparent and reduces assessment of own understanding.
- Generating *reasons* for positions and beliefs does not have the same effect.

- The uncertainty generated by 'mechanistic explanations' affects behaviour and actions.

**Source:**

Philip M. Fernbach, Todd Rogers, Craig R. Fox and Steven A. Sloman. Political Extremism is Supported by an Illusion of Understanding. *Psychological Science*: 939-946, 24(6), 2013.

---

<sup>1</sup>Experimental Methods - Details of Design, Data Coding and Results - are described in the on pages 940-944.