Strong beliefs; a conviction for life

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STRONG BELIEFS; A CONVICTION FOR LIFE

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Research by Abelson (1986) suggests that people’s strong beliefs and convictions are like dear possessions, subsequently not easily abandoned and something the holder tends to fight for. This qualitative study aims at gaining increased understanding concerning conceptualization and psychological mechanisms related to strong beliefs and how the strong belief is manifested and expressed in the holder’s self-image and identity. Five holders of strong beliefs were interviewed, ensuing analyze following the principle of thematic framework. Six super ordinate themes were found to stand out as significantly important in the origin, conceptualization and preservation of a person’s strong belief: Belief; a legacy, Self-image and Identity, The Value-expressive function, In-group- and out-group-bias, Cognitive and emotional dissonance when acting against belief, Perceiving it as impossible to abandon a belief. The “Deliberative discussion” was presented as an important tool possibly empowering people with a less biased approach towards opposing information.

"The human understanding when it has once adopted an opinion draws all things else to support and agree with it. And though there be a greater number and weight of instances to be found on the other side, yet these it either neglects and despises, or else by some distinction sets aside and rejects, in order that by this great and pernicious predetermination the authority of its former conclusion may remain inviolate.” (Bacon, 1620/1960)

We can all relate to situations where we entered a discussion with someone, feeling that the person, or persons we talk to just refuse to listen, and doesn’t seem to understand what we are actually saying. It does not matter how solid, explicit and strong our arguments are, nor how many times or in different manners we try to present them, it still does not affect our opponents’ idea of what is right and wrong in the matter discussed. When the conversation on top of it comprises several participants the result is often one bordering absolute confusion and does not seldom end with actual disputes; hence the expression “never talk about religion and politics (e.g. a strong belief) around a dinner table”.

Research by Abelson (1986) sheds some light on why these situations tend to occur, showing that peoples’ religious or political beliefs are comparable with valuable possessions which have become a solid part of the individuals’ self image and deeply rooted in the identity of the person. This suggests that individuals holding strong beliefs are highly affected by the same concept of self-serving bias, when faced with confirming or opposing facts and information applicable to their existing strong belief or opinion, as they are when they feel their identity being confirmed or opposed. Therefore, opposing someone’s strong belief can be rendered by the person as
opposing the person itself. This can easily lead to bias affecting the opponents, ending up trying to defend themselves, instead of remaining focused on comprehending the nature of the actual question in an open minded way, striving for objectiveness and increased understanding.

Additional psychological phenomena which elucidate why people tend to react in defensive manners when opposed with opposing or challenging material was presented by Katz (1960) who suggests the value-expressive function through which attitudes supply an aid, or tool, for a person to displaying private values and other main principals of the person’s self-concept. “Holding such attitudes is inherently rewarding because it satisfies people’s needs to clarify and affirm their self-concepts”. A person who gains self-esteem by identifying him- or herself with a specific concept, political party or group in society e.g. a Liberalist, a Swedish Democrat or a Christian would be “motivated to hold attitudinal positions that appropriately reflect these prized ideologies and their component values” (Gilbert, Fiske, & Lindzey, 1998). According to this theses a person is willing to sacrifice a lot in order to remain congruent with the cardinals of his or her attitude and strong belief representative of the desirable concept, political party or group. In the modern society of many countries today, where a wide range of political and religious ramifications as well as cultural multiplicity are represented within the normative social framework, the need for reflective openness and increased understanding can be considered a vital tool to prevent misinterpretations and conflicts. It might be crucial for people to strive for open reflection and increased understanding and to face the great number of social variations and independent concepts, bearing a curious mind and an open, interested approach, but is it at all possible? Terms like global coexistence is becoming a sincerely central concept in the modern vocabulary of people in this prevailing society, but is it at all accomplishable in real life?

To preserve and develop a democratic constitution, and the democratic attitudes seemingly founding the democratic constitution, a deepened understanding of the mechanisms behind our way of relating to our personal, as well as other peoples, strong believes and opinions is crucial. It can erroneously be assumed that in a developed democratic society like the Swedish one, the affluent information molding society constitutes unprejudiced and subjectively detached communication. Still a major part of man conflicts within the social arena tend to arise, and remain difficult or unsolved due to opinion- and attitude polarization, caused by a polarized and/or biased approach to the subject in question, needless to say, assumingly without any intension what so ever of being so.

In the doctoral dissertation of Barrling and Hermansson (2004) regarding collective self-images, interest is directed towards how the collective qualities within political parties, consolidated into a persons self-identity. The dissertation has, as its main purpose to elucidate how individuals within a political community generate a collective self-image rather than an individualistic self-image. According to this thesis the individual thereby does not ask, “Who am I?” when reasoning, but rather; ”Who are we?” the identity of the individual corresponding with the identity of the group holding the same set of opinions. In doing so our judgment is immediately blurred by a strong in-group- and out-group bias. This bias constituting the very root to a great
number of Gordian knots, indicating the inflicted restriction it causes, restraining people from thinking outside the box holding their chosen group’s specific way of interpreting the world.

Further research indicates that people, as well as judging themselves as able and skilled in objective thinking, also generally tend to judge themselves less biased than others. Evidence, on the contrary, proclaims that in fact really they are not. Biases mainly tend to confuse the ability to examine facts in an objective and neutral manner. This forcing people to discredit and falsify opposing material and facts as bias and lacking in scientific value. By doing so, we fail to recognize that in fact it is we who survey the opposing material in a strongly biased way. Research by Lord, Ross and Lepper (1979) indicate that people who hold strong beliefs and opinions do tend to examine relevant information in a biased manner. Thus they are apt to critically challenge and evaluate opposing information, whilst agreeing with and affirmatively appraising confirming evidence without equivalently criticizing it. In their study on attitude polarization participants supporting or opposing death penalty were presented with two presumed studies, one seemingly confirming, and the other seemingly disconfirming the participant’s opinions regarding capital punishment. Imaginably the subjects pre-existing opinion on the matter, after taking part of both sides’ information, now would be less polarized. Instead the results show an increased polarization, both proponents and opponents confident the information supporting their belief as more reliable and convincing; writing off disconfirming information as less authentic and bias (Lord et al. 1979).

With all of the above in mind, it is difficult not to question whether coexistence embracing political ramifications and religious multiplicity are at all possible? Are human beings at all capable of thinking and acting objectively? And can the dynamics between opponents with strong beliefs result in anything but an even more aggressive attitude polarization, when faced with one another’s different strong believes?

The main purpose of this explorative study is to gain increased understanding concerning general psychological mechanisms underlying people’s strong beliefs; how individuals form and conceptualize strong beliefs and opinions and how the strong belief corresponds with the person’s identity. It was also examined weather it is possible for people with strong beliefs to experience a changed approach towards opposing material and subsequently alter or abandon their strong belief.

Method

Design
As this essay is of an explorative and analytic character with the main purpose to gain further understanding about the psychological mechanisms behind strong beliefs, a qualitative method was used, based on interviews with a limited number of participants. The interviews were semi structured and built around eight main, open-answered questions, which served as a guideline. The interviews began with a question regarding the participant’s self image and the strong belief experienced as being a link to it: how do you see your identity, what does it include and how does it
relate to your strong belief? To gain increased understanding of the experienced importance of the strong belief, the following question was asked: What would it signify if your trust in the strong belief were lost? The eight main questions were then followed by two questions which were mind experimental: Imagine your children in spite of being raised in accordance with your strong belief developing an opposing strong belief, how would you relate to this? The questions were used as guidelines directing the dialogue rather than being explicitly intermediary quoted. The author of this essay carried out all interviews.

Participants
Five persons, who considered themselves possessing a strong belief of some kind, were interviewed. They were all selected on the basis of media information (News Papers, TV etc.) and through contacts. The group varied in their beliefs, that is, religion including atheism, and varying political beliefs, with various education levels and from various socioeconomic groups; ranking from below average, average, to above average. There were two women, both in their mid thirties, and three men; one in his early forties, one in his late sixties and one in his early seventies. No one of the participants was economically compensated for the interview. All participants were Swedish by birth and citizenship. Below each of the five participants is briefly described.

The Atheist a female psychology student in her mid thirties who had worked as a Human Resource Manager for a large fashion brand. She had a degree from university, lived in a large city (<1000000) and was married and has two children, considering her economical status to be above average. The Liberal also female in her mid thirties living in a big city (<1000000), was engaged full time within the political field at the Swedish government, she had a degree from university, had no children and was in a relationship, stating her economical status as average.

The Swedish Democrat a man in his forties lived in a ranch on the countryside with his wife and two children. He was working as a farmer and was also elected to the local government for the Swedish Democrats political party judging his economical status as average. The Priest a man in his late sixties, working as a Christian priest within the Swedish Church. He had a degree from university and lived in a big city (<1000000), was married and the father of four children. He ranked his economical status as average. Finely, the Social Democrat, a man in his early seventies was retired with a long career as a social worker both domestically and internationally. He had a degree from university and lived in the countryside but also had an apartment in a big city (<1000000). He was in a relationship and had five children from an earlier marriage. His economical status was above average.

Procedure
For the participants to feel as relaxed and comfortable as possible the interviews were held in a place chosen by the person being interviewed, for example their home environment or a café chosen by the participant. The interviews’ began with the participant identifying and describing his or her strong belief, and then proceeded into an open discussion, guided by the eight questions concerning the origin of the strong belief, when it was formed, it’s conceptualization, and the experienced part it had in
the participants life and self identification. Time was given for the participant to reason, explain and interpret during the interview.

**Data Analysis**

When analyzing the data of the interviews the principle of thematic framework analysis was followed. The interview material was transcribed word-by-word from audiotape recorder and examined thoroughly in order to detect and code orderly conditions of over all reoccurring themes. Subsequently the themes, which were derived from the material, were organized into a thematic framework used as reference for the acquired interview data. Six super ordinate themes where derived and will be presented below. These themes appeared as playing a significant role in the origin and psychological dynamic of a person’s strong belief. Every theme is presented jointly with supporting and illustrative cites from the participants. In order to be as absolute and exact in the terminology, vocabulary and emotional expressions, the transcribed raw-data was read and reared, discussed and considered thoroughly and translated accordingly, following the principles of “framework analysis” (Ritchie & Spencer 1993).

**Results and Discussion**

Adduced quotations support the earlier mentioned themes that came to stand out from the data analyze. Selected statements from the interviews were found to display concepts and dynamics that several, or in some case all participants disclosed and which related to the super ordinate themes. Any names that are used are fictive for the participants to remain anonymous.

**Belief - a legacy**

When analyzing the raw data it became clear that each participant’s strong belief was fundamentally connected to the participant’s childhood. When asked about how and when the strong belief first began to conceptualize every one of the participants mentioned their upbringing and family as being of great significance. All of the participants expressed early memories related to their strong belief, some in terms of actual events, others in terms of values procured by one or several important and appreciated family members. Whilst the Liberal refers to the foundation of her strong belief as significantly linked to her family in general, the Priest is more specific, pointing out his mother, and her strong faith in God, as the foundation of his own conceptualization of his Christian belief.

The Priest: ”(…) I was not born in an actively Christian home in that meaning that we went to church every Sunday, dad, I think, never went there, when I was baptized dad was not present, it was my mother who carried me there. But when, …mother had a belief in God, which she gladly and in a natural way sometimes shared, that she had had a strenuous life and she found that God had helped her, that he had helped her to be able to enjoy herself. She prayed to God when she went to a dance.”

The Atheist contrary to the Priest was brought up in a home where there was
communicated that there is no God, subsequently carrying that belief with her, forming her own atheist belief, based on her family belief. The Swedish Democrat, too, refers to his family back ground as the origin from which his strong belief evolved, explicitly saying, “What you carry with you is the foundation”. Also the Social Democrat originates his strong belief to specific family members mentioning his mother being a committed Social Democrat, and his father being one of the intellectual Social Democrats in Berlin and sent to prison due to his strong belief. Communicated by all the participants are the great effects which childhood experiences, family values, the way each of the participants were raised and the social context in which they were brought up, had on the conceptualization of their own personal strong belief.

**Self-image and identity**

Subsequently of being a central part of the participant’s upbringing the result indicates that the strong belief is experienced by the participants as manifested in their personality; the way they see, and identify themselves. Research by Abelson (1986) shows that peoples’ religious and/or political beliefs are comparable with valuable possessions, which have become a solid part of the individual’s self image and thereby deeply rooted in the identity of the person. The results from this study support this idea. When reflecting over his identity the Swedish Democrat repeatedly returns to the importance of taking responsibility towards the society in which he lives and contributing by doing his duty, referring to himself as being a responsible citizen. “You have, like I said before, a responsibility towards society, too, and towards your fellow citizens” (…) I figured, now I too have to do my share”

Further more when the Priest referred to his identity he explicitly said that God i.e. his strong belief constitutes a significant part of his identity. When asked if God was a solid part of his Identity he exclaimed: “Absolutely! Absolutely! Absolutely! Absolutely!” As opposed to the Priest’s indisputable conviction of God’s existence, based on no rational or scientific proof, the Atheist clarifies as to why it is impossible for her to believe in, or even consider the possibility of God. Displaying her self-image as a logical and rational person.

“It is part of my logic, of my logic part of my identity. I am very much so, I can not accept that someone says ’ well this is how it is’ I very much like to have answers to like ’ yes but why?’ Yes, logic thinking, and proof, in that part of my self. (…) And then I set out with my arguments, that what sort of proof is there that there is a God?”

Whilst the Atheist refers to her belief as something supported by, and tightly linked to her rational thinking, subsequently a quite mental process linked to her logic self image. The Social Democrat refers to his belief, in terms of identity; the very core of his whole being. He describes it as something he is, his way of living his life, rather than something he mentalizes or rationalizes.

”I can vote for another party but to be a Social Democrat is a way of living, a way of reasoning, a way of talking, a way of socializing, that is the actual democracy, democracy is not the technocratic solution of how the society is governed, it is a way of being. (…) I think that, this is a very dominating part,
of my way of being, towards people, in everything, from how I present myself.”

The Liberal in many way share the Social Democrat’s experience concerning the strong belief as something deeply rooted in her identity, setting the terms of condition throughout her every action. She describes it as being almost on the edge of autistic behavior saying that there is in fact nothing she can do that is not strongly inflicted by her strong belief. "It’s almost, you could say, on the edge of being autistic about it, because there is nothing really I can do that does not lock me to my strong belief”

Key concepts in the Liberal’s strong belief and self-image are human rights and multiple concepts concerning freedom. The results in general indicate that the participants’ self-images are tightly linked to their strong belief. The Swedish Democrat considered it’s time he takes responsibility for the society in which he lives by getting involved in the Swedish Democrats party i.e. responsibility being an important part of his self-image.

For the Priest living the way he thinks God proclaims i.e. helping people by leading them in the Christian Church, is the main factor. To be a rational thinking person with logic as her main tool appears to be the centre of the Atheist self-image, denying the possible existence of God based on the absence of actual proofs, and whilst the Social Democrat considers solidarity to be the most valuable component in his self-image, the Liberal finds herself dead locked communicating freedom and human rights. When all summoned up, the results indicate that the participants express an aspiration to fit into the concept of their own specific strong belief.

Value-expressive function

The value-expressive function of attitudes allows the individual to publicly express his or her self-concept (Katz, 1960). By explicitly expressing the strong belief in public, a person gains the satisfaction of acclimating personal values and ideals e.g. his or her self-concept (Gilbert et al. 1998). The transcribed raw data from the interviews display several quotations expressing the value-expressive function.

The Social Democrat: “I function pretty much the way I think a Social Democrat should function. There is a distinction between the humanly normative and elitism. I have a damn hard time with elitism (…) I recognize, even in my circle of friends, where most parts are academics, and their approach towards society is strongly affected by elitism (…) I am extremely sensitive if someone behaves in a contemptuous way towards another person. I get very upset if you express a scornful attitude e.g. towards immigrants (…) I think it’s an attitude, a devotion, I show immediately if someone have a problem, I think I express an attitude colored by solidarity.”

Given the opportunity among friends behaving or communicating in opposing manners, the Swedish Democrat declares himself standing up for what he strongly believe is right. In this action he is gaining the reword of explicitly expressed continuity with his strong belief in what he considers the concept of being a true Social Democrat comprises. The value-expressive function is further reflected by the Swedish Democrat when he reasons about the meaning of being an actual ‘Swedish
Democrat’ expressing his opinion of the concept as a responsible Swedish citizen striving for democracy within the Swedish society, expressing his way of taking the responsibility appropriate to fit this concept.

“Me running for a place in the local government, is my small contribution, that’s my way of giving thanks to those who have struggled all these years. And it is important that we have citizens in Sweden who show civil courage by standing up for the cause and taking their place! You shouldn’t have to pay a price too high, but it is of great importance that we show civil courage, that, well, despite this I have the courage to support this cause, and I do, because I think it is important! I feel a lot more democratic then those who tell everybody how they should think and that the Swedish Democrats are anti democratic, because that is simply not the truth. No, if there is any one who, in fact, actually does stand up for it (i.e. democracy) then in truth it is I! Actually!”

The Swedish Democrat states he is prepared to pay the price of being regarded by some as anti democratic, because he considered the ones accusing him, being the actual anti democrats, and so gains the reward of the value-expressive function by expressing his strong belief when publicly supporting and acting in a way which, according to his value grounds, includes him in the group, or concept of, the ‘real’ democrats e.g. the Swedish Democrats political party.

The resent Swedish legislation allowing Christian gay-marriages within the church of Sweden led to a crucial crossroad for the Priest. He opposed the legislation and although considering him self being “pro homo” rather then “against homo” can never agree to marry same-sex couples, this refusal possibly denying him a bishopric. Something he willingly sacrificed in order to stand correct in his strong belief that it is not in accordance with the Christian gospel in which he strongly believed.

“This maybe lead to me loosing a bishopric, it might have been the price I had to pay. I was ordained in 1968, the second youngest Priest in Sweden…it is a very long time ago (smiles) still I feel extraordinary young, but in that Church, at that time, it was unthinkable to think that way. It is the Church of today that has changed, isn’t it, and the Church has changed away from the Bible that I love. The Church has walked away from that Jesus that I love and who says the one who loves me is true to my word. It had been much easier for me if I had just swallowed all of it. But it has been, and still is, a price I have to pay. But I could never…I couldn’t ever imagine saying anything else, just to fit in (…) I am not a anti-homo-priest. I could almost say I am more pro-homo then anybody else. I have had such people living in my home, sitting by my dinner table. They have had nowhere to stay, but I let them stay with me. But by the words of the Bible I cannot accept it.”

In this quotation he states that despite the fact that he was considered by some to discriminate gay-people, when he on the contrary considers himself being pro-gay, and despite the fact that it might have prevented him a bishopric, he is still true to his conviction, manifesting in public, that the act of gay-marriage goes against the words
of the bible.

The Atheist on the other hand, when asked to be the Godmother of a friend’s newborn, had to refuse the word of the Bible, and rewrite the words she was expected to say in church, to be concordant with her strong belief that there is, in fact, no God.

“I told the mother, who is my oldest childhood-friend, that I am sorry, technically I am allowed to be a Godmother, but I can not say in church that I intend to raise her (the child) religiously, so instead what I said, in this little speech that I held, was that I will, with my out-most capacity, give her good values, and answer questions about, well…life’s existential questions, sort of speak.”

At this event the value-expressive function of attitudes allowed the Atheist to refuse to read the words of the Bible and deny the Christian concept, to express her own personal value grounds as an atheist.

In the interview with the Liberal her statement expresses how the value-expressive function enables her to manifest her personal values and strong belief publicly, even if it means venturing her private life.

“When asked what I was doing; throwing strictly private matters out in the open, saying that sooner or later someone would get me, and I answered that someone might, but for me this is the only way that works, and you can call it Nihilistic kamikaze politics, but here I am, do what ever you want with it.”

The Liberal, true to the foundation of her strong belief, is prepared to take the toll of those opposing her in sake of congruency in terms of publicly manifested actions communicating her personal strong belief.

The outline of these results suggests that it is important for all the respondents not to follow the main stream but to have their own say, in their own way, even when it is connected with personal forgo.

In-group- and out-group bias
As mentioned in the introduction, collective self-images easily consolidated into a person’s self-identity, subsequently inveigle the individual’s perception into a group-bias conceptualization. The most frequent group-biases in today’s society are due to attitudinal polarization regarding gender, race and age (Fiske & Taylor, 2008). In spite of the fact that the respondents apprehended their own actions and thinking as ridden of bias, statements indicate a bias polluted thinking.

The Swedish Democrat explicitly declares him self as having nothing against immigrants but his statement communicates other wise referring to him and his alike as we, the Swedes, the ones who do their fair share, and to those people who don’t, i.e. the out-group, the immigrants, in terms like “such people”. He also regard them as not contributing to the Swedish society saying they are in general not taking part in
the Swedish society, mentioning lack of interest in Swedish traditions, not learning how to speak Swedish, not watching Swedish television but going about their own business, clinging to their old way of living, instead of becoming integrated into the Swedish society.

“There are such people, which have lived here in twenty, thirty years and still don’t even know how to speak Swedish. They don’t watch Swedish television, don’t listen to Swedish radio, don’t read Swedish News Papers. That is not taking part in the Swedish society; a society where we pay our debt, where everyone contributes. We can’t have people who suck out the system; everyone has to pay their share. I have absolutely no problem what so ever with immigrants in it self, I want to make that perfectly clear. What I don’t like is when you exploit, or don’t take part. Try to integrate into the Swedish society.”

In-group bias is to be detected in quotations by all but one of the participant’s statements. The Social Democrat expresses an implicit in-group bias when referring to the solidarity between him and his fellow Social Democrats “sticking together, trying to put up a fight” in the neighborhood and strongly right winged school environment where his children grow up and which constituted a surrounding that stroke a solid conservative mark. Through out his interview he continued to visualize the in-group e.g. the Social Democrats versus the out-group e.g. mainly the ones not ascribing to the social Democratic concept. Further more, results from the interview with the Priest states a distinct out-group bias referring to the group usually considered his main in-group namely his fellow members of the Christian Church. The Priest being convinced that the Bible is not a question of interpretation strongly opposes Christians believing that in fact it is. This devotion positions him outside the group generally regarded his in-group i.e. the Christians but who, by his standards are now fighting against the veracious words of the Christian teaching by proposing the Bible as interpretive. “Jesus said ‘believe in me and you will have eternal life’ that can’t be interpreted in any other way”

The Atheist again is attributed as logical and with common sense; declaring a distinction between people living here, on earth i.e. herself and other likewise rationally thinking people, and religious people i.e. non-rational people. She refers to religion as an easy way out for people to relate to there own lack of responsibility and control over their life, instead ascribing difficult events and choices to be the result of God’s will rather then their own doing.

The one interview representing results not explicitly indicating any evident group bias is the one stating the Liberal. The core concept communicated by her statements is absolute liberalization of the individual. The Results from the Liberal expresses a sprawling identification in various groups, not explicitly declaring any specific group as being her total opposite nor claiming or insinuation a belonging to any other concept than the liberal ideology. With the exception of the Liberal the respondents communicate the concept of group-bias through different attitudes, but with the main conjunction of ascribing certain attributes, which correspond with their own self-
image and collective self-image, as prior and super ordinate. Encircling opposing or askew concepts as ignoble and malign.

**Cognitive and emotional dissonance when acting against belief**

Emotional and cognitive dissonance emerge as a result of inconsistency transitional belief and behavior, and the idea that people appreciate cognitive and emotional consistency rather than inconsistency is proclaimed in both the psychological field as well as among philosophers (Gilbert et al. 1998). Regarding counteractions in discordance with the strong belief, each respondent acknowledged emotions and thoughts, when recollecting the event, as discreditable and unpleasant. The Atheist refers to the time mentioned earlier when asked to read a text from the Bible during the Christening of her Goddaughter.

“I was to read a text, and I didn’t enjoy doing it, it was something like through God’s blessing you will... I read the text, but it was because it was an obligation. I felt... but I thought, ‘what ever, I guess I will read this after all’, but I didn’t find it nice or anything, just tried to be rhetoric and deliver it to the audience, kind of.”

The thoughts and emotions expressed by the Atheist regarding this event states dissonance and dislike as a result of going against her strong belief, still feeling the need to do so because of the social context.

The Swedish Democrat first can’t remember ever acting against his strong belief, saying he has never had to go against his strong belief. But when recollecting arguments and discussions resolving in him holding back his opinion he communicates askew feelings. Expressing the will to speak his voice, but judging the situation to be inadequate to do so, this causing him to experience anger and frustration.

The Priest on the other hand says he should have been more selective regarding marrying couples he found lacking in moral. Pointing out the own organization and fear of negative media exposure as the cause of surrender. “When I consider some marriages I’ve officiated, which I, if true to my conscience I should not have performed”. His statements indicate regret not denying marrying couples that did not share the values, or live in accordance with the sacred condition of marriage. Whilst the results from the Priest expose dissonance regarding obeying the own organizations guiding principles, when his conscience in contrary told him not to, results from the Social Democrat exhibit the opposite. He troubles over refusing his own organization and the guideline they presented during their last election.

“When I left the party. That did not feel good! I had been a member for almost (counts in silence) …40 years, you know. (…) Yes that made me angry! That made me angry! How the hell can you join in with the communists who have been the main opponents for so many years? How the hell can you collaborate with them? That made me think, well, No! This is it!”


Although expressing certainty in terms of his decision, the feelings stated do not indicate synchronism with his act. Being an active member of the Social Democrats political party for forty years, terminating his membership due to difference of opinion in one, for him, important point of issue is expressed as connected with discomfort and emotional dissonance. Similar to the Social Democrat, the Liberal, too, had to refuse her political party, but before doing so experienced strong negative feelings, culminating when running for a place in the Swedish Parliament. 

“When running for a place in the Swedish Parliament for a party I knew didn’t fully commit to the values I commit to. (…) It was a very heavy felling, a little bit like on the edge of an existential crises, which at the end resulted in me leaving the party, more or less the day after the election. I thought, no I will leave it all. I can’t do this.”

The quotation shows a clear dissonance between her strong belief and how she thinks it should be manifested in actions and political cause, and her actual actions e.g. running for a party that didn’t strive towards the same goals as she herself did. Hereby acting against her strong belief.

To sum up; the results indicate that the respondents utter thoughts and feelings of discomfort in situations and at times when they for different reasons have felt the need to act against their strong belief.

Perceiving it as impossible to abandon a strong belief
As mentioned in the introduction, research by Abelson (1986) shows that strong beliefs are like valuable possessions, thereby not easily abandoned. Questions and discussions concerning this theme resulted in statements supporting Abelson’s theory. No one of the respondents could imagine any information; fact or empirical evidence, which would make them abandon their strong belief. And if it were to happen, they imagine it as being of great distress and, for some of them, a tragedy. Results from the interviews with the Social Democrat indicate that he considers it unlikely that there would be any hidden facts or unknown information that could make him abandon his strong belief, but if it were to happen, he expresses it as very critical: “if so… well… it would be very critical.”

When discussing the matter of doubt or relinquish from his strong belief the Swedish Democrat distinctively rejects the possibility, and although finding it important to dare to question your own, also stating that when faced with some opposing information, as a result of its inaccuracy, the strong belief grows even stronger and more solid.

“No! No! No! …I can’t say I have. I guess I never really had that feeling that ‘no this might be wrong’! (…) I have never considered voting for another party or anything. Never! That has been very clear! Always, the whole time no matter, …no matter what, what shame, or what they have made up I have always known that it wasn’t true, and when they do, your strong belief just grow stronger.”
This quotation is in accordance with results based on research by Lord et al. (1979), which shows that when faced with opposing material, no matter how scientific and empirically fortified, instead of consider it and become less polarized, people tend to increase their attitude polarization, subsequently becoming even more convinced they stand correct in their strong belief. In agreement to this the Swedish Democrat can’t image anything provoking a declination from his strong belief.

‘No! (Immediate) that is, then the party would have to change fundamentally (laughs) if so I guess I would have to change my strong belief, but I cannot see it. My faith in Jimmy Åkesson (e.g. the leader of the Swedish Democratic party) as the party leader, and the persons surrounding him, it is…like…I follow them blindly in what they know to be the best, really.”

This quotation from the Swedish Democrat shows the difficulty for the respondent to imagine leaving the party and thereby abandoning his strong belief. As mentioned, a difficulty the Swedish Democrat in no way posses exclusively. The Liberal, in correspondence with earlier mentioned results from the Social Democrat, talks about how hard a possible abandoning of the strong belief would be, and how she at the thought of it dreads an imagined alteration of her strong belief.

“That, of course would be very, very hard! (Long silence) it would be very, very, very, hard! …but…after much frustration, and crying, and tears and so on, I think I would find some sort of pragmatic solution to that to. But…it would take its toll on me. Absolutely! It would take its toll.”

Strong emotions are communicated in this quotation, again, like the preceding quotations, exposes the difficulty imagining abandoning the strong belief. The Atheist contrary to the others communicates rationality stating that if there were enough credible evidence she would abandon her strong belief. But so far there has never been a question of doubt. “No, because I have never been given any evidence of it, sort of (…) so I have never doubted.” When questioned what evidence might alter her strong belief, if in fact there could be such evidence, the Atheist responded after thinking for a while, as follows:

“If there were evidence sufficiently adequate, absolutely. (…) If I pray to God, it should be fulfilled, and if it isn’t then God has to explain as to why it wasn’t. Do you understand? And then (laughs) if the rings are blessed the marriage should turn out good and if the rings are not blessed the marriage should turn out bad (laughs) do you see what I mean? If you baptize the child it should be protected by God and if you don’t then something terrible should happen. All of this is, sort of…very strong evidence! But sure…if these evidence should appear, of course I would believe. I would say thanks and accept it gladly (laughs) then you had something to live your life by (laughs).”

These words from the Atheist can be interpreted as following the same rational thinking process as her earlier presented statements regarding her strong belief. Though not necessarily combined with the same dread, anxiety or resistance as the preceding quotation from the rest of the respondents, the Atheist communicates the
same difficulty imagining abandoning the strong belief, ridiculing the very thought of it. In accordance with the rest of the respondents and in line with his earlier statements The Priest states it would be a tragedy if he were to lose his strong belief, but that he is not worried about it, as it will never happen. “Terribly tragic! I will never do that, but terribly tragic! Terribly tragic! When asked if abandoning his strong belief would be like a small death he immediately answers, “Yes!” Regarding any opposing evidence that might alter his strong belief he states that he would not believe it no matter how deductive the proof appeared to be.

“No! I would not believe it, not in the first round. I am a scientist and have, over the years seen and read hundreds of theory’s about pretty much everything, so I would approach it as one more theory, let see what happens next, let see if it’s tenable.”

The Priest hereby claiming to be a scientist but stating he would hardly consider upcoming opposing information; suggesting a biased thinking in prevention of imagined loss of strong belief, referring to the possibility as somewhat incredible but if so; imagined to be of great distress. Taken together the specific strong belief of each and every one of the respondents is communicated by them to play a significant part in their life and something they find hard imagining abandoning. Stating a conviction not easily abandoned or even altered.

General Discussion

The main objective of this study was to gain increased understanding concerning general psychological mechanisms e.g. the construction and dynamics of people’s strong belief; how individuals form and conceptualize strong beliefs and opinions, as well as how the strong belief manifests and corresponds with the person’s self-image and identity. People in general have an irresistible urge to elucidate communicated strong beliefs and behavioral conducts subscribing it to explainable cause, making them easier to predict, comprehend and control (Myers, 2008). In accordance with this, results from this study show that irrespective of the actual core value of the strong belief; it appears as though strong beliefs mainly are founded by the same general psychological mechanisms. Suggesting that based on social diversity e.g. the individual’s upbringing and social context, two persons are doomed to think differently when faced with the same question. The results in the present study with earlier research suggesting the strong belief and its foundation is the core of the mentioned diversity; deeply affecting people’s way of thinking and reacting.

People generally believe themselves capable of separating thoughts that are pure wishes and fantasies, from thoughts that in fact are based on reality. This notion is proved a fatal mistake. Instead of interpreting and experiencing the world as it really is, people’s interpretation and experiences are greatly colored by personal expectations and values (Montgomery 1994). An important factor regarded in this essay is the way people find maintaining support to preserve the strong belief, suggesting bias attitudes e.g. towards opposing information. This suggestion in line with earlier studies by Montgomery (1993) which show that people are highly skilled
in finding arguments that preserve and strengthen their strong belief. Also in agreement with research by Lord et al. (1979) the results from this study suggest that despite being confronted with convincing and scientifically acknowledged counter-evidence, or information indicating askew conviction, deeply entrenched beliefs are still most likely to survive. This was explicitly stated by the Priest; considering himself possessing a greatly scientifically experienced mind, but still refusing opposing evidence, discharging it as something unlikely as well as lacking in quality and significance. In contrast, the Atheist in this matter declares that she would indeed change her belief alteration if confronted with binding counter evidence, but stating the evidence in a highly unimaginable manner, communicating ridicule. Implicitly indicating the same unlikelihood as the previous statement by the Priest.

The answers given by the participants are presumably affected by social credibility i.e. the participant answering in manners expected and which are considered social and politically correct; this enfeebling the validity of the study. Additional factors that might have altered the validity are the generally shared attitudes regarding holders of any strong belief e.g. a Christian Priest or a Swedish Democrat. This in it self constitutes an interesting aspect i.e. the holder of the strong belief’s own perception and attitude towards holders of strong belief. Verification of a qualitative study generally concerns determining whether the results hold to be generalized over the main population (Kvale, 1997). Allegedly the results from this study hold to generalization over population within the context presented in this study. As previously stated some of the most frequent biases in today’s society are due to attitudinal polarization regarding gender, race or religion these attributes represented in all sorts of societies. This fact strengthens presented results proposed overall generalization.

Numerous conflicts arise and remain unsolved due to opinion- and attitude polarization, caused mainly by the earlier stated components and dynamics. According to presented research people apparently have a tendency of thinking narrow-minded and acting biased, but without any obvious or experienced comprehension of this dilemma. So how should people interact to advance this behavior without it leading to conflicts? How does one best wield the difficult task of open debates and discussions? If the Priest and the Atheist were challenged with one another’s opposable strong believes would they be less polarized? If the Liberal or the Social Democrat were to debate the Swedish Democrat, would it make him less critical towards prevalent integration politics? According to what was previously stated; no, on the contrary it would more likely generate further polarization. But as manifested in the introduction; the world is becoming increasingly smaller; integration over geographic boarders as well as over perceived psychological boarders brings about political ramification and religious multiplicity as an evident unconceivable fact. Forcing people to coexist, making all other options seems impossible. The key might lie within the quote stated by the Social Democrat: “democracy is not the technocratic solution of how the society is governed, it is a way of being (...) we have to create a democratic attitude.” In agreement to this the “Deliberative conversation” is presented as significantly important tool (Hermanson, Karlsson & Montgomery, 2008). Deliberation is clarified as signifying a specific approach towards other people, regardless belief position, which is fraught with
respect, fairness, consideration and an actual willingness to discuss. When strong believers in a conflict situation act in deliberate manners towards their opponent a capacity for change is created, enabling the parts to alter their preferences, identities and relations. This central capacity for change could be the resources needed to open up to people’s disagreements and polarized attitudes, caused by their private strong belief. (Hermanson et al. 2008).

Throughout the results is the indication that irrespective of each other and regardless of the core values in their specific strong belief, the respondents share the same psychological mechanisms concerning the formation and conceptualization of their strong beliefs and opinions. Results also suggest the importance of the value-expressive function of attitudes allowing the participants to publicly express his or her self-concept. Furthermore, the results propose that feelings expressed when opposed or faced with questioning attitudes are similar disturbing despite the variety of core values grounding the belief concept. Results also suggest that the respondents perceive the strong belief as an inestimable part of their identity, and consider it not easily abandoned.

Future studies and research should pay attention to questions consider how to fortify and encourage a deliberative approach towards attitude polarizations and strong beliefs and convictions. Although living in a democratic society clearly facilitates the process, the approach towards conflicts should strive for prevention rather than retrospective damage control.
References


