

When evidence is powerless

Beliefs that give meaning to life can't be dislodged by factual evidence



Salman Hameed

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Millions of individuals in the UK believe in UFOs and ghosts. Yet we know that there is no credible evidence for any visitation from outer space or for some dead souls hanging out in abandoned houses. On the other hand, there is now overwhelming evidence that humans and other species on the planet have evolved over the past 4.5bn years. And yet 17% of the British population and 40% of Americans reject evolution. It seems that for many there is no connection between belief and evidence.

Some – maybe most – of the blame can be attributed to an education system that does not train people to think critically. Similarly, most people do not understand methodologies of science and the way theories get accepted. For some, scientific evidence has no role in the way they envision the world.

People who claim to have been abducted by aliens provide an interesting example. The "abductions" happen mostly in the early morning hours and, apart from psychological trauma, there is no physical evidence left behind. Some scientists have attributed these episodes to sleep paralysis – a momentary miscommunication between the brain and the body, just before going to sleep or waking up.

While abductions have most likely not taken place, the trauma experienced by the individuals may still be real. Some abductees have shown signs of post-traumatic stress disorder, and many cite this as the worst experience of their life. However, for many, "abduction" was the best thing that ever happened to them.

This is a life-changing event for the abductees. They feel a sense of uniqueness. Abduction may have been painful, but they were the ones who were picked. While the

public mocks claims of alien abductions, many abductees join support groups that include others who share similar experiences. For the abductees, evidence is irrelevant. They *know* it happened. They experienced it. These abductions form their whole worldview and provide an explanation for the occasional paralysis at night, a sense of uniqueness and meaning in life, and a community of like-minded individuals.

I can't help but think of evolution debates taking place across the world. I have been interviewing physicians and medical students in the Muslim world, and have seen a wide range of responses. Many have no problem with biological evolution, whereas others reject it vociferously. The reasons for rejection are often religious, but then justified with misinformed ideas about evolution ("where are the missing links?", "evolution is just a theory").

For a subset of interviewees, evidence (or lack thereof) plays no role in their rejection of evolution. In their minds, an acceptance of biological evolution will lead to the abandonment of their religion. The cost of accepting evolution may simply be too high for them.

I don't want to give the impression that we should just shrug our shoulders and give up on critical thinking. But we have to realise there will always be individuals who reject evolution for reasons that have little to do with evolution. If certain beliefs are bound up with personal meaning-making, then an attack on those beliefs threatens what is meaningful for that person. An effort to move them towards more evidence-based thinking may need to untangle meaning-making from such beliefs. Even if our efforts are unsuccessful with these individuals, a deeper appreciation, understanding and sympathy for their beliefs may be essential in communicating better science.



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