

Study examines how reflecting on your values before opening your mouth makes for happier relationships

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Ever found yourself angry at a situation and in desperate need to tell the world about it by ranting to anyone who'll listen? Maybe it's time to

pause; inhale and reflect on what values you hold dear.

A new interdisciplinary study, conducted by philosophers and linguists at Cardiff University and psychologists at the University of Bath has found that a process of reflecting on life values before a debate can enhance people's willingness to listen to others and engage with them in a civil dialogue.

For the study, the research team recruited 303 participants. Participants were all put in [small groups](#) where they were asked to discuss the merits of charging tuition fees for education. Before the debate, half were first asked to write about the life values they considered important. All discussions were recorded, coded, and analyzed.

The analysis revealed that the process of reflecting on values first helped to inspire individuals' "intellectual humility" (their awareness of their own fallibility and openness to others' views): 60.6% of participants who reflected on their values first showed more humility compared to the [average person](#) who was not given this task.

In a seemingly ever-distant world where opinions appear increasingly polarized, the researchers suggest their results show grounds for optimism. If people were to stop and reflect on the values which are important to them, debates in the online and offline world could be far more harmonious, they speculate.

Co-lead for the study, Dr. Paul Hanel who conducted the research at the University of Bath but is now based at the University of Essex explained, "We are often told that we live in a polarized world where having the 'wrong' view about topics will get you shouted down before you have had a chance to finish.

"This research suggests that polarization might be exaggerated and that

by pausing to reflect on [personal values](#) before engaging in these kinds of conversations, our interactions could become more harmonious."

[Previous research](#) from the University of Bath-based team in 2019 found that people are in fact much more united in their beliefs and values than media reporting often suggests. The work forms part of a wider project all about "Changing Attitudes in Public Discourse," led by Cardiff University.

Co-author, Professor Greg Maio, Head of the Department of Psychology at the University of Bath added, "The good news from this study is that the vitriol we often see perpetuated online does not have to be that way. By presenting participants with an opportunity to reflect on their values, we found a marked improvement in how they engaged with discussions.

"In the future, we would like to see if this kind of value reflection also works online, to encourage less arrogant dialogue among social media users. We would certainly be interested in sharing our findings with social media developers and others."

Co-author, Professor Alessandra Tanesini, a philosopher at Cardiff University adds, "Our research shows that strategies promoting virtuous attitudes by means of value affirmation improve people's ability to learn from each other. Ours is an intervention whose implementation in schools and universities can also make an important pedagogical contribution to students' education."

The study is published in the journal *Royal Society Open Science*.

More information: Using Self-Affirmation to Increase Intellectual Humility in Debate, *Royal Society Open Science* (2023). [DOI: 10.1098/rsos.220958](https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.220958).
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