

DOGMATISM

Authored by
mohammad looti

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Dogmatism

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Psychology, Philosophy, Political Science

1. Core Definition and Scope

Dogmatism refers to the tendency to assert one's opinions or beliefs in an authoritative, rigid, and often arrogant manner, founded upon an unquestioning adherence to a specific doctrine or set of principles. It embodies a closed cognitive structure that resists counter-evidence or intellectual challenge. In its most fundamental psychological interpretation, dogmatism is characterized by a high degree of intolerance toward individuals holding differing beliefs, resulting in an assertive and authoritative behavioral pattern. The core definition highlights not merely the strength of conviction, but the manner in which those convictions are maintained and defended against conflicting information.

This concept is frequently studied in social psychology as a measure of generalized rigidity and closed-mindedness. Unlike mere ideological commitment, which can be intense but still open to rational debate, **dogmatism** represents a cognitive style where the individual's belief system is maintained defensively. The rigidity inherent in dogmatic thinking often allows the belief system to contain internal inconsistencies or contradictory elements without prompting cognitive dissonance or revision. Such internal contradictions are often preserved through the isolation of distinct belief clusters, preventing them from being critically compared against one another.

Philosophically, dogmatism stands in stark opposition to principles of skepticism, critical rationalism, and fallibilism. Where the latter approaches embrace the potential for error and the necessity of continuous evaluation, the dogmatic approach assumes infallible knowledge and rejects the provisional nature of human understanding. The psychological function of this rigidity is often linked to the need for cognitive closure, providing the individual with a sense of security and structure in an ambiguous or threatening world.

2. Etymological and Historical Context

The term **dogmatism** traces its roots back to the Greek word *dogma* (δῶγμα), meaning "that which seems true," "opinion," or, later, "a fixed principle or settled doctrine." Historically, in theological and philosophical contexts, a dogma was simply an established tenet or authoritative rule, not necessarily implying rigid adherence or closed-mindedness in the modern pejorative sense. Early philosophical uses, particularly among the ancient Greek schools, contrasted dogmatists--those who claimed to possess certain truth about specific subjects (such as Plato and Aristotle)--with skeptics, who questioned the possibility of achieving certain truth.

The transition of **dogmatism** into a concept describing psychological rigidity primarily occurred

during the Enlightenment and intensified in the 20th century. During the Enlightenment, thinkers began to challenge the unquestioned authority of religious or political dogma, elevating reason and empirical evidence. However, it was the social and political upheavals of the mid-20th century, particularly the rise of totalitarian regimes, that spurred significant academic interest in the psychological mechanisms underlying adherence to rigid, authoritarian belief systems.

This academic inquiry culminated in the seminal work of Milton Rokeach in the 1950s, who sought to abstract the concept of rigidity from specific political ideologies (like fascism or communism) and establish it as a generalized structure of personality. Rokeach's work transformed dogmatism from a philosophical label applied to doctrines into a quantifiable, measurable psychological trait describing the individual's cognitive organization, irrespective of the specific content of their beliefs.

3. Dogmatism as a Personality Trait

In modern psychology, dogmatism is primarily understood as a pervasive personality trait characterized by an overly secure and defensive cognitive organization. This trait dictates not just the adherence to a specific belief set, but the fundamental style in which knowledge is processed and maintained. Highly dogmatic individuals utilize cognitive defense mechanisms to protect their core belief systems from challenges, often perceiving intellectual threats as personal threats. This defensiveness is critical, as it explains why dogmatic individuals are frequently intolerant of people with differing beliefs, viewing dissent as an inherent danger to their own psychological stability.

A key characteristic of **dogmatic personalities** is the structural organization of their beliefs into relatively closed systems. A closed belief system is insulated from reality and external pressures by a barrier of defense mechanisms. This isolation allows for the maintenance of contradictory or irrational elements within the system, since the individual lacks the cognitive flexibility or willingness to integrate opposing ideas. The defensive nature of this cognitive structure means that new information is not evaluated on its merit but filtered based on its source: if the source is deemed authoritative or aligned with the established doctrine, it is accepted; if the source is antagonistic, it is rejected, regardless of the validity of the information itself.

Furthermore, dogmatism is correlated with a reliance on authority. Dogmatic individuals tend to exhibit an intense need to identify with powerful reference groups or authorities that support their worldview, while simultaneously displaying intense rejection and hostility toward groups or individuals who threaten that structure. This trait is seen as distinct from, but related to, the authoritarian personality, which is often narrowly focused on political obedience. Rokeach aimed to demonstrate that dogmatism is a more general measure of intolerance and closed-mindedness applicable across the political spectrum, encompassing both dogmatic left-wing and right-wing extremism, as well as dogmatic adherence to scientific or religious doctrines.

4. The Rokeach Dogmatism Scale (D Scale)

The most influential tool for the empirical study and measurement of dogmatism is the Rokeach Dogmatism Scale (D Scale), developed by Milton Rokeach and published extensively in his 1960 work, *The Open and Closed Mind*. Rokeach designed the D Scale to capture the structural organization of a belief system, specifically focusing on the dimension of open-mindedness versus closed-mindedness, rather than the content of political ideology. He argued that the degree of dogmatism could be measured by assessing the rigidity and interconnectedness of beliefs, the degree of intolerance toward non-believers, and the reliance on external authorities.

The D Scale consists of a series of statements designed to elicit agreement or disagreement regarding various aspects of cognitive processing and interpersonal attitudes. Key dimensions measured include:

Intolerance of Ambiguity: The difficulty in coping with uncertainty or complexity, leading to a premature cognitive closure.

Authoritarian Submission and Aggression: A predisposition to obey perceived authority figures and express hostility toward deviants or those outside the in-group.

Interconnectedness of Beliefs: The extent to which disparate beliefs are linked into a mutually supportive, though often illogical, system.

Sense of Isolation: The feeling that one's belief system is under threat, leading to heightened defensiveness against the "outside world."

The development of the D Scale allowed researchers to systematically study dogmatism across diverse populations, demonstrating its utility in explaining various social and cognitive phenomena, including prejudice, resistance to therapeutic change, and educational performance. While the scale has undergone numerous revisions and critiques regarding its factor structure and potential ideological biases, it remains a cornerstone in the psychological study of closed-mindedness.

5. Philosophical Implications and Epistemology

Epistemologically, **dogmatism** represents a significant barrier to rational inquiry and knowledge advancement. If epistemology is concerned with the nature and scope of knowledge, then dogmatism is the vice that refuses to acknowledge the limits of that scope. The dogmatic refusal to subject beliefs to critical scrutiny violates the foundational principle of rational discourse, which requires that beliefs be contingent upon evidence and logically consistent argumentation. A dogmatic claim is asserted as self-evident or based solely on authority, making it impervious to falsification.

In the context of ethics and political philosophy, dogmatism often fuels moral absolutism and intolerance. When moral principles are held dogmatically--as unassailable and universally

applicable without exception--they preclude the possibility of ethical negotiation, situational nuance, or empathy for differing cultural perspectives. This rigid framework is frequently identified as a psychological precursor to extreme political ideologies, where adherence to the party line supersedes objective evaluation of consequences or facts.

Critical philosophers, particularly those associated with the tradition of Karl Popper, view **dogmatism** as the antithesis of the scientific attitude. Popper argued that the strength of science lies not in its ability to prove theories true, but in its willingness to subject them to rigorous attempts at falsification. The dogmatic scientist, by contrast, seeks only confirming evidence and ignores or actively dismisses contradictory findings, thereby stalling intellectual progress. Therefore, dogmatism is understood not merely as a strong opinion, but as a deliberate rejection of the processes that lead to reliable knowledge.

6. Psychological Manifestations and Correlates

The psychological impact of high dogmatism extends beyond mere belief structure, manifesting in measurable behavioral and cognitive correlates. One of the most significant manifestations is generalized **prejudice**. Research consistently shows that high dogmatism correlates with higher levels of prejudice toward various minority groups, regardless of whether the prejudice is rooted in racial, religious, or political differences. This is because the dogmatic mindset requires clear boundaries between in-groups (the holders of "truth") and out-groups (the "infidels" or "deviants").

Furthermore, dogmatic individuals demonstrate reduced cognitive flexibility and difficulty in adapting to novel situations or changing environments. They often exhibit a preference for simple, black-and-white solutions and find comfort in highly structured and predictable settings. This cognitive rigidity makes dogmatic individuals resistant to persuasive attempts that require deep re-evaluation of core values. In educational settings, high dogmatism can manifest as difficulty grasping concepts that require synthesis of contradictory ideas or tolerance for ambiguity, such as advanced philosophical or scientific theories.

Dogmatism is also linked to heightened anxiety and existential threat. Rokeach suggested that the closed system of beliefs serves a functional purpose: it protects the ego from perceived dangers, both internal (e.g., self-doubt) and external (e.g., social disorder). By rigidly adhering to an unquestionable doctrine, the individual attempts to master uncertainty, explaining why individuals often turn to dogmatic systems during times of social crisis or personal stress.

7. Critiques and Limitations of the Concept

Despite its widespread adoption, the concept of dogmatism and the Rokeach D Scale have faced several significant academic critiques. A primary limitation concerns the potential confounding of dogmatism with other political attitudes. Critics argue that while Rokeach intended the D Scale to

measure a general, content-free structure of closed-mindedness, the scale's items often display a subtle bias toward measuring right-wing political extremism, leading to questions about its genuine ideological neutrality. Subsequent research has attempted to develop scales that truly separate structural rigidity from political conservatism, with mixed results.

Another critique focuses on the unitary nature of the trait. Some psychologists suggest that "dogmatism" might be too broad a label, encompassing several distinct factors, such as intolerance of ambiguity, cognitive rigidity, and authoritarianism. If the concept is not a single, unified construct, then the D Scale may be inaccurately aggregating multiple cognitive styles into a single score, potentially limiting its predictive validity in specific domains.

Finally, cross-cultural applicability remains a challenge. The D Scale was developed largely within a Western, individualistic context. Applying the scale and the underlying psychological concept to cultures with different traditions regarding deference to authority or the role of collective dogma requires careful calibration, as what appears dogmatic in one culture might be considered conventional adherence to necessary social norms in another. These criticisms necessitate continuous refinement of both the conceptual framework and the measurement tools used to study closed belief systems.

Further Reading

[Dogmatism \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Rokeach Dogmatism Scale \(ScienceDirect\)](#)

[Rokeach, M. \(1960\). *The Open and Closed Mind: Investigations into the Nature of Belief Systems and Personality Systems*. Basic Books.](#)