

How to Belief Report

Kerry Vaughan
Leverage Research

Introduction

Belief reporting is a simple introspective tool for detecting your underlying beliefs on many topics.

One way to think about belief reporting, and the way most practitioners and experimenters think about it, is that it involves holding an intention to do something like “tell the truth,” and then making statements to see if they are consistent with that intention. This has two interesting effects. First, it makes mental content explicit. Second, it allows you to identify a particular class of mental content, a class which we believe is psychologically significant and bears an important relation to actions and emotions.

The goal of this guide is to provide a practical set of instructions on how to belief report without assuming any background knowledge or experience with introspection. We then conclude with a brief discussion of why we think belief reporting is an interesting and valuable tool for introspection research.

Note: It is one of the goals of our [exploratory psychology program](#) to help people learn to introspect better and to provide better documentation and guidance on the topic. The materials provided here will be updated over time in response to feedback and suggestions. Thanks to everyone for contributing!

How to belief report

The most common instructions for belief reporting are to hold an intention, (e.g., “to tell the truth,” “say what is,” or “to give voice to reality”) and then to make statements to see if they are consistent with that intention.¹ Learning to belief report involves learning how to adopt the correct intention and then learning how to tell whether a particular statement is consistent or inconsistent with the intention. This is best done by iterating through examples where one holds an intention and then takes actions that are consistent or inconsistent with that intention to learn to distinguish the phenomenological and physiological differences between the two.

¹ We describe multiple options for the belief reporting intention because individual words will refer to different mental content in different people. The goal is to find a mental instruction roughly in this area that works for you. For more information, see appendix B.

Exercise 1: Reference experiences

Find an object and put it down somewhere within arm's reach of you. Now, hold the intention to **not** pick up the object. While maintaining that intention, pick up the object.

What happened?

In all likelihood, one of two things happened. Either you found that you couldn't pick up the object or you switched your intention and then picked it up. In either case, we can call this experience "intention clash." Different people describe intention clash differently, but it includes words like "difficulty," "paralysis," "strain," "resistance," etc.

Now set the object back down. Hold the intention to pick up the object and pick it up.

In all likelihood you successfully picked up the object and the experience was very different from before. It might be described with words like "natural," "normal," "easy," "smooth," etc. We might call experiences of this type "intention match."

Exercise 2: Your own name

Now we can try some simple belief reporting to note the difference between intention clash and intention match.

While holding the intention to tell the truth, first say (either out loud or in your head) "my name is [someone else's name here]." Note what you experience.

Next, hold the intention to tell the truth and say "my name is [your name here]." Note what you experience.

The experience in each case may be different. The expected result is that in the first case, the experience of intending to tell the truth and saying someone else's name might have some similarities with the experience of intending not to pick up an object and then picking it up. For example, it might have felt "difficult," "weird," or "wrong." On the other hand, the experience of intending to tell the truth and then stating your name might have felt "natural," "normal," or "smooth" much like the experience of intending to pick up an object and then picking it up.

Physiological reactions to belief reporting

In addition to being associated with a characteristic set of experiences, belief reporting is associated with a characteristic set of physiological reactions.

Intending to tell the truth and then making statements contrary to that intention is sometimes accompanied by unconscious physical gestures that do not accompany the person's everyday

speech. Examples include shrugging, increased blinking, sly smiles, fidgeting or a variety of other unusual physical movements. There may also be differences in vocal pattern including increased hesitancy, changes in rate of speech, changes in the emphasis placed on words and so on. These physiological responses might naturally be interpreted as mental hedges, mental avoidance, or some similar related phenomenon.

If you find that exercises 1 and 2 fail to produce any notable differences in experience, then it may be possible to use physiological signs like those mentioned above to belief report. Because people often do not notice their own physiological reactions, we recommend recording yourself, watching yourself belief report in a mirror, or having a friend watch you to see if they notice any differences.

(If you fail to notice any reliable phenomenological or physiological differences in exercises 1 and 2, consult Appendix A below or trying moving on to exercise 3. Different people will find it easier or hard to identify the relevant signs in different contexts.)

Exercise 3: Simple sentences

Once you have a sense of the basic signs associated with intention clash and intention match, you can try belief reporting on a variety of topics. For each of the following, hold the intention to tell the truth and try saying each sentence. Make sure to pay attention to the meaning of the words as you say them.

I am sitting	I am not sitting
I am standing	I am not standing
I am a man	I am not a man
I am a guy	I am not a guy
I am a woman	I am not a woman
I am a chick	I am not a chick
I am nonbinary	I am not nonbinary
[insert your own examples here]	

You might experience a few things while doing this. You might have the experience of intention match with one or more of the statements, intention clash with other statements, and a more neutral response to others. For example, I get intention match with “I am a man,” intention clash with “I am a chick,” and something more neutral for “I am a guy.”

Usually, the statements that produce intention match will be statements that you already recognize as being true of you. For example, I identify as male and get intention match for statements like “I am a man” and “I am a guy.” In other cases, you might get an unexpected

result like intention match when belief reporting “I am a woman” despite identifying as male. These cases are discussed below.

Exercise 4: Sentence completion

You can also do belief reporting through sentence completion. You simply adopt the intention to tell the truth and then complete the sentence. Some examples:

My goal for today is . . .

It’s bad to [thing you don’t want to do] because . . .

It’s good to [thing you expect to do] because . . .

I’m really looking forward to . . .

I’m really dreading . . .

It can also be helpful to play around with the exact wording of the sentence completion to see if different wordings increase or decrease the degree of intention match. For example, “I am really looking forward to the weekend” might have feel like it matches, but the phrase “I am really looking forward to not having to go to work” might match even stronger. We find that it is often more useful to work with the phrases that resonate more.

Unexpected belief reports

A properly performed belief report is a statement made while holding the intention to tell the truth that has the phenomenology of intention match with respect to that intention. In most cases, belief reports are unsurprising in the sense of giving the answer you would have expected prior to performing the belief report.

Occasionally, however, belief reports will be surprising or unexpected. You might belief report things that you don’t think of yourself as believing (e.g., that you’re female when you identify as male) or that you recognize to be false given your evidence (e.g., that you’re lazy even though you work more than 80 hours a week). In our experience, this is normal.

There are many ways to interpret unexpected belief reports. The most common interpretation used by practitioners and experimenters is that unexpected belief reports match a person’s underlying beliefs, where underlying beliefs may differ from a person’s endorsements or views held “all things considered.” Some people interpret “underlying beliefs” as referring to the content of system 1 (following Kahneman²), or the beliefs of subpersonalities or parts such as those identified by Internal Family Systems (IFS).

There are, of course, many additional possibilities as well.

² Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 1st edition (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013).

In our experience, unexpected belief reports tend to yield psychological content that is useful to interact with and explanatory of a person's behavior and emotional responses frequently enough that we think it is unlikely to be a mere artifact of the belief reporting procedure.

How to know if you are belief reporting properly

Because the ordinary language available to describe mental actions is imprecise, it can be difficult to determine whether you're engaging in belief reporting or accidentally engaging in some other activity. The easiest way to verify that you are doing belief reporting properly is to get the opinion from someone familiar with belief reporting and skilled at identifying what mental actions another person is taking. Failing that, here are a few basic things that we expect people to find if they are belief reporting properly:

1. You have experienced the different phenomenology of intention match and intention clash in multiple cases.
2. When you belief report on topics that are mundane or otherwise not psychologically fraught you find that most belief reports are expected.
3. You've encountered some number of unexpected belief reports.

While these do not guarantee that belief reporting is being done correctly, they do serve as useful indicators.

Belief reporting and belief change

Many people who are interested in belief reporting will also be interested in causing changes to their mental content. We think of belief reporting as an instrument in the sense that it is a cheap, easy, and (when used well) reliable method for detecting mental content and rendering it explicit. However, belief reporting can also be used to change the mental content that one detects.

One option is to use belief reporting to find mental content and then utilize techniques from other introspective practices like internal family systems (IFS), Gendlin's Focusing, or techniques from cognitive behavioral therapy to attempt to change that content. You can then belief report on the topic again to see whether the content has indeed changed. Leverage's psychology researchers developed a number of techniques for changing mental content that were built by using belief reporting as a feedback loop in this way. We will describe these techniques in the future.

Belief reporting can also cause belief change on its own. There are two basic mechanisms by which this occurs. The first mechanism is that belief reporting mental content causes one to pay attention to that mental content. Since mental content sometimes changes when paid attention to, the act of paying attention can sometimes cause updates to occur.

The second mechanism is that paying attention to mental content can sometimes trigger particular mental actions which can then change the mental content. Some of these mental actions will feel voluntary or intentional, but they can also feel automatic or involuntary in some cases. The specifics will vary from person to person but can include mental actions like comparing mental content to one's evidence, subjecting mental content to optimism or pessimism, and so on. For example, it is somewhat common to find belief reports that immediately register as having arisen from past events and which trigger the mental action of comparing those beliefs to one's current evidence. This in turn can cause the mental content to change.

Conclusion

This document describes belief reporting, a simple introspective tool for detecting your underlying beliefs on many topics. We hope you will find it to be a valuable tool for introspection.

Belief reporting is one of the foundational tools of Leverage's Exploratory Psychology program, which aims to furnish to the public an open source set of tools, methods, and frameworks for introspection. To learn more about this program, please [visit our website](#).

Leverage is building a community of researchers interested in learning how to use the Leverage psychological toolset. If you'd like to be a part of this, please reach out!

Also, you can:

- Follow [Kerry Vaughan](#) and [Leverage Research](#) on Twitter.
- Sign up for Leverage Research's [quarterly newsletter](#).
- Join our [Discord](#).

Appendix A: Common issues in belief reporting

This appendix describes some common issues that people experience in learning to belief report. It will be expanded over time as we learn more about common issues people experience and how to solve them. If you experience difficulty getting belief reporting to work for you and the suggestions below fail to resolve the issues, feel free to contact kerry@leverageresearch.org for assistance.

Problem	Solution
Too many sentences come out	<p>1 — Try belief reporting again. Sometimes after getting content out one will then be able to simply belief report the statement in question.</p> <p>2 — Try speaking freely on the topic until it no longer feels like you need to “get the content” out. Then try belief reporting again.</p> <p>3 — Try holding the intention to tell the truth and also holding the intention to “state the center of the matter” (or “state the essence” or “speak simply”). Then try saying the sentence while holding those intentions.</p>
No identified phenomenological or physiological signs	<p>1 — Sometimes no special phenomenology or physiology indicates intention match. Try belief reporting the negation of the statement to see if you get intention clash.</p> <p>2 — Make sure you are maintaining the intention to tell the truth, and make sure you are paying attention to the meaning of the statement you are trying to belief report. Then try belief reporting again.</p> <p>3 — Trying belief reporting on “I am intending to tell the truth about [statement you were just trying to belief report].” In some cases you will find that you belief report that you are not intending to tell the truth about the relevant statement.</p> <p>4 — Try belief reporting on other statements</p>

	<p>for a while where you can successfully belief report. Then come back to the statement you were having trouble with.</p>
<p>Can't hold the intention to tell the truth</p>	<p>1 — Try belief reporting on whether there is anything bad about telling the truth (or knowing what you belief, or saying what you think, etc.) about the statement in question. In some cases you may not belief report because it seems bad or inadvisable for some reason.</p> <p>2 — Try belief reporting on other nearby statements first and letting yourself acclimate to the idea of belief reporting on the original statement.</p>
<p>Both a statement and its negation indicate intention match; i.e., you can belief report both</p>	<p>1 — People (e.g., CEOs) are sometimes able to change their beliefs on the spot. This makes it possible for a person to belief report one thing, then change their belief and belief report the opposite right after. To check for this, try to check whether there is an intention to change the belief, or pay attention to whether there is some phenomenological or physiological sign of the belief changing between belief reports.</p> <p>2 — Check to see whether the statement and the negation are meant in the same way. A person might belief report “I am happy” and then belief report “I am not happy” by interpreting these statements in a way that makes them not actually contradictory (e.g., as “there is some way in which I am happy” and “there is some way in which I am not happy”).</p>
<p>Some other problem is encountered</p>	<p>1 — Contact Leverage staff; we are planning to both help individuals troubleshoot their introspective practices and update our documentation to make it more complete and make introspection easier to learn on one's own.</p>

Appendix B: Notes on wording and word-concept match

The point of belief reporting is to access your mental content and turn it into words which are then used as stand-ins for the mental content itself. But, the relationship between the words and mental content can be finicky in ways that are important to keep in mind.

One common example is that the same word can pull up different concepts in different people. For some people the word “truth” might mean "what's accepted by science" or "what God believes" or "what I can reasonably justify" instead of pulling up concepts related to what you believe to be the case. In most cases, words will pull up a similar cluster of concepts for most people, but the differences in what concepts they pull up can make a big difference in belief reporting. In fact, the reason we suggest several different versions of the belief reporting intention (e.g., “to tell the truth,” “say what is,” or “to give voice to reality”) is to help you find the words that most closely match the concept we have in mind.

You should also feel free to try out several related words for the content that a belief report produces. For example, closely related words like “man,” “guy,” or “dude” can produce very different responses in terms of whether and how strongly they clash or match the belief reporting intention. The goal is to find words that pull up the mental content you’re interested in. It’s even fine if that means you end up using words in idiosyncratic ways provided you don’t lose track of what mental content the words are referencing.