

Are Conservatives from Mars and Liberals from Venus?

Maybe Not So Much

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### Maybe Not So Much

One of the most robustly replicated effects in political psychology is the “ideo-attribution effect,” that is, the tendency for conservatives to explain social problems by referencing dispositional causes, such as people’s lack of will power, personal discipline, self-reliance, or diminished moral standards, and liberals’ tendency to explain the same problems by appealing to unjust social practices and structures. The ideo-attribution effect has been documented across a wide range of contexts, including explanations for poverty (Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001; Furnham, 1982; Pandey, Sinha, Prakash, & Tripathi, 1982; Sniderman, Hagen, Tetlock, & Brady, 1986; Sniderman & Tetlock, 1986; Williams, 1984; Zucker & Weiner, 1993); wealth (Bobbio, Canova, & Manganelli, 2010); homelessness (Pellegrini, Queirolo, Monarrez, & Valenzuela, 1997; Skitka & Tetlock, 1992); unemployment (Gaskell & Smith, 1985; Skitka & Tetlock, 1992); crime (Carroll, Perkowitz, Lurigio, & Weaver, 1987); obesity (Crandall, 1994; Lantinga & Skitka, 1996; O’Brien, Hunter, & Banks, 2007); AIDS infections (Skitka & Tetlock, 1992, 1993), racial differences in success (Reyna, Henry, Korfmacher, & Tucker, 2006); foreign aggression (Sahar, 2008; Skitka, McMurray, & Burroughs, 1991; Skitka, Stephens, Angelou, & McMurray, 1993); and even explaining why people need assistance following natural disasters (Arceneaux & Stein, 2006; Skitka, 1999).

Ideological differences in the explanations for the causes of various social problems have important downstream consequences, including predicting people’s willingness to support various public policies. For example, liberals generally favor increased spending on social programs, whereas conservatives oppose such spending, effects that are mediated by the different attributions liberals and conservatives make for why people need government assistance (e.g.,

Cozzarelli et al., 2001; Feather, 1985; Furnham, 1982; Griffin & Oheneba-Sakyi, 1993; Kluegel, 1990; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Sniderman & Tetlock, 1986; Williams, 1984). The goals of this chapter are to (a) explore three competing explanations for the ideo-attribution effect, that is, the dispositional, ideological script, and motivated reasoning hypotheses, and (b) argue that political psychologists need to resist the tendency to assume that ideological differences always or even often arise from dispositionally different cognitive “wiring” of liberals and conservatives.

**The dispositional hypothesis.** The dominant explanation for the ideo-attribution effect is that it is a consequence of stable individual differences in the ways that liberals and conservatives interpret their social worlds (the *dispositional hypothesis*). According to this argument, people vary in their baseline propensities to see the causes of others’ behavior as rooted either in something about the person, or something about the person’s situation. Individual differences in preferences for personal versus situational explanations for behavior subsequently lead people to adopt different positions and political identities. People who consistently perceive the causes of behavior as residing mostly within persons are more attracted to conservative beliefs and political orientation, whereas people who consistently perceive the causes of behavior to be the result of situational or institutional causes are more attracted to liberal beliefs and political orientation.

The conclusion that liberals and conservatives represent two very different kinds of people is consistent with a broader array of research that finds consistent associations of specific personality traits and reasoning styles with political orientation. Several decades of research on cognitive style constructs such as dogmatism (Rokeach, 1956), tolerance of ambiguity (Sidanius, 1978), flexibility-rigidity or close-mindedness (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Taylor, 1960) and integrative complexity (e.g., Russell & Sandiland, 1973; Scott, Osgood, &

Peterson, 1979; Tetlock, 1981, 1983) indicates that, although there are certainly exceptions, conservatives are more dogmatic, intolerant of ambiguity, close-minded, and are more likely to think in terms of black and white than they are to be high in integrative complexity (see especially Jost et al., 2003). Some even argue that differences between liberals and conservatives are not superficial ones, and may be functionally “hard wired” in the brain (e.g., Amodio, Jost, Master, & Yee, 2007; Kanai, Feilden, Firth, & Rees, 2011; Schreiber et al., 2013). According to this view, conservatives are more likely to seize on first pass dispositional attributions in part because their high needs for closure and cognitive rigidity prevent them from engaging in the more cognitively demanding and effortful process required to make a situational attribution (Gilbert, 1998; Gilbert & Krull, 1988; Gilbert, Pelham, & Krull, 1988). In summary, the dispositional hypothesis predicts that liberals and conservatives reason about and/or perceive their social worlds in very different ways, and that these differences run very deep into people’s personalities and perhaps even their brain structure and function.

Although the dispositional explanation for the ideo-attribution effect is certainly plausible, there are at least two other competing explanations that have not been given as much attention in the literature: The ideological script and motivated reasoning hypotheses. We review these in turn next.

**The ideological script hypothesis.** The ideological script hypothesis reverses the causal order proposed by the dispositional hypothesis. Instead of differences in attributional thresholds leading people to self-identify as either liberal or conservative, the ideological script hypothesis proposes that identifying oneself as liberal or conservative leads people to adopt different explanations for social problems. Specifically, after self-identifying as either politically liberal or conservative, people may learn the corresponding attributional “party-line.” According to this

hypothesis, attributions about the causes of social problems are *post hoc* explanations that justify a specific political point-of-view, rather than a dispositionally different way of interpreting the social world. Accordingly, this hypothesis predicts that ideologically patterned attributional differences should emerge only in contexts for which there is an easily accessible ideological script.

The ideological script hypothesis is consistent with the common image of citizens as “cognitive misers,” with little or no political knowledge (e.g., Kam, 2005). People therefore use political parties and their platforms as a low effort heuristic for developing opinions about candidates and issues, or what some refer to as “System 1” style of reasoning (Stanovich & West, 2000; Kahneman, 2003). For example, candidate party affiliation shapes opinions about political candidates (Mondak, 1993a), something that even trumps whether the candidate actually endorses more party consistent policy positions (Skitka & Robideau, 1997). Similarly, information about party ties also shapes the direction of people’s positions on various issues (e.g., Jacoby, 1988; Mondak, 1993b; Squire & Smith, 1988) and their perceptions of candidates’ positions on various issues (Conover & Feldman, 1989; Feldman & Conover, 1983), something especially likely among people low rather than high in political awareness (Kam, 2005).

Zaller (1992) found that when liberal and conservative elites both supported the Vietnam War in 1964, people who attended to politics and current events showed similar non-partisan support for the war. By 1970, however, political elites had become much more divided about the war (liberals became increasingly against it, but conservatives continued to support the war effort), a division that was widely disseminated in the popular press. A subsequent division emerged among politically aware liberals and conservatives in the mass public. Similar patterns of results have been observed in public support for both World War II and the 2003 Iraq War

(Berinsky, 2007). In other words, public opinion followed rather than shaped elite opinion, results that are also consistent with the notion that many people derive their opinions from the party line.

The ideological script hypothesis assumes that people do not really engage or take the time to understand the complexities of various policy positions largely because they lack the time, motivation, or ability to engage in more effortful “System 2” style of high effort systematic reasoning and analysis. They therefore rely on cognitive short cuts and heuristics, such as a party line script, when making these kinds of judgments. According to the ideological script hypothesis, we should therefore observe evidence of the ideo-attribution effect only in contexts in which elite or party opinion provides an easily accessible script.

**The motivated reasoning hypothesis.** The dispositional and ideological script hypotheses both posit that liberals and conservatives arrive easily at their attributional conclusions, that is, that political opinions are the result of long standing dispositional differences in modes of thinking and reacting to events (the dispositional hypothesis) or through the use of heuristics or low effort modes of thought and parroting of elite or party opinion (the script hypothesis). The motivated reasoning hypothesis paints a more nuanced picture of people’s reasoning styles. Motivated reasoning refers to the tendency of people to conform their assessments of information to some goal other than accuracy (e.g., Kunda, 1990). The motivated reasoning hypothesis predicts that liberals and conservatives may be equally inclined to make personal attributions for why the poor are poor, why criminals engage in crime, and why fat people are fat. Where they may differ, however, is in their motivation to correct these first-pass attributions about the causes of behavior in domains where ideological differences have been observed. When attributional analysis yields a conclusion that is inconsistent with perceivers’

core values or preferred conclusions, they will be motivated to engage in corrective processing. This effortful processing should lead them to consider the possibility of non-personal causes for why people might be poor, commit crimes, etc.

According to this hypothesis, people should be equally likely to make first pass personal attributions about the causes of social problems—a notion consistent with Kluegel and Smith's (1986) assertion that individualism represents the dominant ideology in the United States. This hypothesis is also consistent with Gilbert and colleagues' (Gilbert, 1998; Gilbert & Krull, 1988; Gilbert, Pelham, & Krull, 1988) research on spontaneous trait inferences. According to Gilbert, people spontaneously infer personal causes for behavior, and only take into account situational information in a second, more effortful stage of reasoning, if they have sufficient motivation and cognitive resources to do so (Gilbert, 1998; Gilbert & Krull, 1988; Gilbert, Pelham, & Krull, 1988).

Similarly, Devine and her colleagues find that people automatically judge others in stereotypical terms (Devine, 1989; Devine, Monteith, Zuwerick, & Eliot, 1991). Low- and high-prejudiced people primarily differ in the extent to which they are motivated to correct these initial stereotypical judgments. Low-prejudice people experience compunction because the automatically activated stereotypical judgments are inconsistent with their core values and beliefs about themselves as tolerant and egalitarian people. This compunction, in turn, motivates stereotype reasoning. High-prejudice people, in contrast, do not tend to adjust their initial stereotyped impression because they lack the motivation (i.e., compunction) to do so.

Taken together, these lines of theory and research converge on the hypothesis that perceivers may be motivated to adjust their initial attributions when the logical conclusions of a personal attribution conflict with their values. Figure 1 details a model of ideological reasoning

based on an integration of these perspectives (note: the attributional side of the model was influenced by the explanation process model proposed by Anderson, Krull, & Weiner, 1996).

The model posits that when people notice an event or problem (e.g., they notice a delay in the check out line they are in) they need to categorize or define what they have noticed (a person using food stamps). Even before perceivers engage in attributional analysis, their expectations will influence how they interpret a given event or problem (Ross & Nisbett, 1991). After interpreting the event, people generate an initial explanation, which we know from previous research is likely to be a trait inference or a personal attribution (Gilbert, 1998; Gilbert & Krull, 1988; Gilbert, Pelham, & Krull, 1988). This stage of reasoning is expected to happen in a very automatic way, based on people's expectations, previous experience, etc. The interpretation of the event, however, may simultaneously initiate another cognitive process, i.e., it might activate people's concerns with their core values. In short, some events may initiate dual processing. One process will be theoretically focused on attributional analysis, and another will be focused on making a judgment consistent with one's ideological values or goals. For example, witnessing a person using food stamps may lead to two separate thought processes: (1) an attributional chain of reasoning (why does this person need government assistance?) and, (2) a chain of reasoning activated by values or goals--e.g., thoughts about unequal access to educational and job opportunities and humanitarian goals, or alternatively, thoughts about values associated with self-reliance and the protestant work ethic.

If initial attributional analysis and activated values lead to consistent conclusions, processing will stop. If activated values and initial attributions lead to inconsistent logical conclusions, however, people will be motivated to continue processing, presuming they have the time and cognitive resources to do so (cf. Devine, 1989; Devine, Monteith, Zuwerick, & Eliot,

1991). Unlike other inconsistent thoughts or beliefs, values are expected to provide an extra motivational component to lead people into System 2 reasoning because they are “shoulds” and “oughts” that are closely connected to people’s self-concepts (e.g., Rokeach, 1973). When second stage reasoning yields a satisfactory solution to the conflict between initial attributions and values, attributional processing will stop.

The motivated reasoning hypothesis therefore suggests that (a) the observed tendency for liberals to prefer situational explanations and to be more likely to help people with internal-controllable causes of need in the contexts studied to date is a result of a cognitively effortful reasoning process, (b) we should observe ideological differences in preferences for personal versus situational attributions only in contexts where people are motivated by value conflict or other ideologically-based goals to engage in second-stage processing, and (c) liberals and conservatives are equally capable and likely to engage in second stage processing should value conflict or other ideological goals provide the motivation to do so.

In summary, there are at least three different psychological accounts for why liberals and conservatives differ in their attributions and subsequent responses to various problems. The dispositional hypothesis is consistent with the idea that the “hard wiring” of liberals and conservatives basically differs. The ideological script hypothesis suggests that liberals’ and conservatives’ reasoning is essentially the same in these contexts; they are simply relying on different scripts. The motivated reasoning hypothesis similarly posits that liberals’ and conservatives’ reasoning is explained by very similar cognitive and motivational processes, and that context (such as the degree to which making a given attribution is consistent or inconsistent with people’s values) will determine whether people make a dispositional or situational attribution in a given situation.

We turn next to a review of a number of studies that were designed to explicitly tease apart which of these explanations provides the clearest account for the ideo-attribution effect. The College Bowl and essay attribution studies tested whether the ideo-attribution effect only emerges in political behaviors (as predicted by the ideological script and motivated reasoning hypotheses) or if it also emerges when people make attributions for apoliticized phenomena (as predicted by the dispositional hypothesis). The repeated prompt study tests whether liberals and conservatives are equally or differentially likely to revise the attributions they make overtime and with repeated prompting. The motivated reasoning hypothesis predicts that liberals should be more likely to show a revised pattern of response than conservatives (first making a personal attribution, followed by a situational revision), whereas the dispositional and script hypotheses would both predict no evidence of revision. The motivated reasoning hypothesis also argues that it should be cognitively effortful for liberals to make a situational attribution. The cognitive load study explicitly tests this hypothesis by examining whether the ideo-attribution effect goes away when people make judgments under conditions of high rather than low cognitive load. Finally, the strongest evidence in favor of the motivated reasoning hypothesis would be a demonstration that the effect reverses when conservative values are more consistent with making a situational than a personal attribution, and liberal values are more consistent with making a personal than a situational attribution. The Haditha and cougar studies tested whether the ideo-attribution effect reverses under these conditions.

### **The College Bowl Study**

One way to tease apart whether the ideo-attribution effect is a consequence of dispositional differences, ideological scripts, or motivated reasoning is to test whether ideological differences in attributions emerge in less politicized contexts. We used an

experimental paradigm designed to test hypotheses about attributional processes more generally rather than to explicitly test for ideological differences, that is, the College Bowl demonstration of the “fundamental attribution error” (the tendency for people to be inclined to make personal rather than situational attributions for others’ behavior, Ross, 1977) to test whether liberals and conservatives would be differentially likely to make personal attributions in a less politicized context (Skitka, Mullen, Griffin, Hutchinson, & Chamberlin, 2002). Participants read a description of two students who were asked to participate in a quiz game. The students were described as volunteers for a classroom demonstration. The classroom instructor explained that their task was to play a game: one of them would be randomly assigned to the role of quizmaster, and the other would be assigned the role of contestant. The quizmaster’s task was to generate 5 questions from his general knowledge, with the only requirement being that he had to know the correct answer, and then to pose these questions to the contestant. The story went on to describe the questions the quizmaster asked the contestant (which were in reality selected from the game Trivial Pursuit), and the contestant’s answers. The contestant was described as getting only one out of the five answers correct.

If perceivers take into account the situational constraints of the game—that is, that the quizmaster and contestant roles were randomly assigned—they should realize that the quizmaster would have fared just as poorly as the contestant if their roles had been reversed. If, however, perceivers fail to take into account the situational constraints of the game, they are likely to rate the contestant as less intelligent than the quizmaster.

If liberals and conservatives dispositionally differ in their preferences or ability for making personal versus situational attributions, conservatives, but not liberals, should rate the contestant’s intelligence as lower than the quizmaster’s. The ideological script hypothesis, in

contrast, predicts that liberals and conservatives will not differ in the attributions they make about the relative intelligence of the quizmaster and contestant, because there is no easily available ideological script for why people might perform well or poorly in the context of a College Bowl game.

The motivated reasoning hypothesis can also provide an account for why we might expect to see ideological differences in the College Bowl context. Academic debates about the malleability of intelligence have raged for years, and the arguments on the side of both nature and nurture have taken on a distinct ideological flavor. For example, Herrnstein and Murray (1996) argued in their controversial book *The Bell Curve* that inherited intelligence, not environment, is the primary determinant of a variety of social behaviors, including class, socio-economic level, crime, educational achievement, welfare, and even parental styles. Critics suggest that *The Bell Curve* represents a conservative political agenda masquerading as research (e.g., Gould, 1996; Kincheloe, Steinberg, & Gresson, 1997), with one critic going so far as to claim that it “lays the political, ideological, economic, and paramilitary groundwork for fascism” (Rosenthal, 1995, p. 44).

Simply quantifying intelligence has been argued (by liberals) to be an ideologically conservative effort to place individuals into “awkward, arbitrary categories” (Hitchens, 1994), and that efforts to assess human intelligence contradict the formal American commitment to equality (Hayman, 1998). These academic debates are not the substance of more popularized political discussion, and therefore are less likely to be absorbed as an ideological script than are, for example, attributions about the causes of poverty or crime. These academic debates, however, point to a fundamental tension between liberals’ commitment to egalitarianism and making personal attributions for intelligence. In short, liberals’ commitment to egalitarianism

could lead them to be reluctant to report differences in perceived intelligence, a reluctance that may even extend to something like performance in a trivia game.

Results of the College Bowl study indicated that conservative participants rated the contestant as significantly lower in intelligence than the quizmaster, whereas liberals saw the contestants as equal (and above average) in intelligence. The observation of ideological differences in this experimental context was therefore consistent with the predictions of both the dispositional and motivated reasoning hypotheses, but inconsistent with the ideological script hypothesis.

### **The Essay Attribution Study**

Another test of the dispositional, script, and motivated reasoning hypotheses used an adaptation of Jones and Harris's (1967) attitude-attribution paradigm. Jones and Harris had research participants guess the true opinion of another student after reading an essay the student presumably had written. In one condition of the study, participants were told that the author of the essay had freely chosen their essay position (either pro- or anti-Castro), thereby making it easy to guess the essayist's opinion. In the other condition, participants believed that the author had no choice about the position to take in their essay, because they had been assigned their position as a participant in a debate. Although research participants perceived a smaller difference in opinion between the pro- and anti-Castro essayists in the no choice as compared to the choice condition, on the whole participants still assumed that the content of the essay reflected the author's true feelings even when the participant was given no choice about the position they took on the essay. In short, most people failed to take into account the situational constraints imposed on the participant in the no choice essay condition.

For our version of the study, we had all participants evaluate essays that were written under no choice conditions (Skitka et al., 2002). If the dispositional hypothesis is correct, political orientation should moderate participants' tendency to see a difference in the "true attitude" of participants randomly assigned to take a pro versus con position on a given issue. Conservatives should be less likely to take the situation into account (i.e., the random assignment of the position essayists were to take), and therefore should rely more on the essay content when guessing the essayists true position on the issue than liberals. The ideological script hypothesis, however, predicts that the political orientation of the perceiver should have no impact on perceivers' attitude attributions, because there is no available ideological script to suggest what the authors' true attitudes should be. The motivated reasoning hypothesis also predicts an absence of ideological differences in attributed attitudes. Although liberal values might motivate corrected intelligence assessments, neither liberal nor conservative values or goals are implicated in attributing someone's true attitude based on reading an essay written under no choice conditions.

Results revealed no evidence of ideological differences in participants' ratings of the essayists' true attitudes. Liberals and conservatives both made correspondent inferences, that is, they inferred that the essayist's attitude was consistent with the position taken in the essay. Similar results emerged even when situational constraints were made especially salient to half of the participants by making them write an essay with no choice about the position to take before evaluating another essayists' true attitude. The results of the attitude attribution study are inconsistent with the dispositional hypothesis, but can be explained by either the script or the motivated reasoning hypotheses.

### **The Repeated Prompt Study**

The 1987 pilot of the American National Election Study (ANES) survey included a number of open-ended items that used multiple probes (e.g., is there anything else you would like to add?) that allowed for the possibility for people to make different inferences as they reflected on the key question. Specifically, people were asked to consider the following:

Some people feel the government in Washington should see to it that every person has a job and a good standard of living. Others think the government should just let each person get ahead on their own. Which is closer to the way you think about it?

Skitka et al. (2002) used this data to further test the implications of the dispositional, script and motivated reasoning hypotheses. The dispositional and ideological script hypotheses predict that conservatives' first and subsequent replies to this prompt would emphasize personal factors (e.g., laziness, the need to work hard), and that liberals' first and subsequent replies should emphasize situational or institutional barriers to getting ahead. In contrast, the motivated reasoning hypothesis predicts that liberals and conservatives should be similarly likely to make a personal inference in response to the first prompt, but that ideological differences would be more likely to emerge on the follow-up prompts. Conservatives' commitment to individualism and self-reliance should provide little motivation for them to think about situational impediments to getting ahead, so they should maintain a mostly consistent pattern of personal attributions across responses. Because liberals' commitment to egalitarian access to humanitarian assistance conflicts with notions like "people should get ahead on their own," liberals should be more likely than conservatives to subsequently correct their initial statements by making references to situational and institutional barriers that prevent some people from being able to do so.

As can be seen in Figure 2, liberals were (a) less likely than conservatives to mention personal attributions, (b) more than twice as likely (19%) as conservatives (8%) to demonstrate a corrected pattern of response, and (c) most likely to spontaneously mention non-attributions when asked about social spending programs (usually references to humanitarian values). Conservatives' were most likely to make references to personal attributions on their first and subsequent prompts. Although conservatives' reactions could be accounted for by a scripted or dispositional explanation, it is difficult to account for liberals' reactions using either of these frameworks. These results are therefore more consistent with the motivated reasoning than either the dispositional or script hypotheses.

### **The Cognitive Load Study**

One key distinction between the dispositional and script hypotheses on the one hand, and the motivated reasoning hypothesis on the other, is the degree to which they posit that situational explanations in politicized contexts should be relatively effortful. If the ideo-attribution effect reflects an underlying dispositional tendency or a scripted response, then liberals' tendency to make situational attributions should be just as quick and easy as conservatives' dispositional inferences. If these inferences are the consequence of effortful motivated reasoning, however, then putting liberals under cognitive load should eliminate the ideo-attribution effect. To test this idea, Skitka et al. (2002) adapted another attributional judgment and decision making task used in prior research to explore ideological differences in willingness to provide public assistance (see Skitka & Tetlock, 1992, 1993). Specifically, research participants were asked to consider a number of claimants who varied in how they contracted AIDS and in their sexual orientation (the latter was included as a distractor variable). Participants' task was to decide as many or few of the claimants they thought should be given subsidized access to drug treatment. Previous

research has found consistent evidence of ideological differences in willingness to help people with personal responsibility for their plight—another version of the ideo-attribution effect. Under conditions of no resource scarcity, liberals tend to help all who need assistance, regardless of why they need it. Conservatives, in contrast, withhold assistance from those personally responsible for their plight (Skitka & Tetlock, 1992, 1993).

The goal of this study was to see if cognitive load would attenuate previously observed ideological differences in willingness to help the personally responsible. Half of the participants made their judgments and allocation decisions while also engaged in a tone-tracking task (the high cognitive load condition), and half made their judgments and allocation decisions without the distraction of the tone-tracking task (the low cognitive load condition; Skitka et al., 2002). Results replicated previous research in the low cognitive load condition: liberals typically helped all claimants, whereas conservatives denied assistance to those who were personally responsible for contracting AIDS (i.e., who practiced unsafe sex despite knowing they were at risk). In the high cognitive load condition, however, liberals allocated assistance like conservatives: liberals and conservatives alike denied assistance to the personally responsible. In summary, the cognitive load study was consistent with the motivated reasoning, but not the dispositional or script hypotheses.

### **Can the Ideo-attribution Effect be Reversed?**

The motivated reasoning account for the ideo-attribution effect argues that value conflict motivates liberals to be more inclined to make situational attributions in some contexts, specifically, when their values conflict with making a personal attribution. One implication of this explanation for the ideo-attribution effect is that conservatives should be similarly motivated to make situational attributions when their values conflict with making a personal attribution.

One limitation of previous research is that it has consistently tested hypotheses in contexts where liberals' values conflicted with making personal attributions, without testing whether the same effect would emerge when conservatives' values were at odds with doing so. To address this limitation, the next three studies tested hypotheses in contexts in which conservative values were more consistent with making a situational than a dispositional attribution for the target behavior.

One context we thought would be promising for testing whether the ideo-attribution effect could be reversed was that of authority misconduct. There are some hints in the literature that suggest that conservatives may be less punitive when responding to authority misconduct than liberals (Altemeyer, 1981). Because punitiveness is often shaped by attributions of personal responsibility (Carroll et al., 1987; Weiner, Graham, & Reyna, 1997), these findings may mean that conservatives may make weaker personal and stronger situational attributions for authority figures' misconduct. Conservatives' value commitments about respecting authority should conflict with holding authority figures personally responsible for their misconduct (e.g., Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009), which could motivate them to override the default tendency to make a personal inference, and to make a situational one instead.

**The Haditha Study (Version 1).** Morgan, Mullen, and Skitka (2010) asked research participants to make attributions for the real world actions of U.S. Marines accused of killing 24 Iraqi civilians in Iraq. Participants read a news story that reported on the real-world case in which a Marine unit was attacked by a roadside bomb and one Marine was killed in Haditha Iraq in November of 2005. The Marines suspected 5 men in the area were involved, and ordered them to lie on the ground. The men ran instead, and the Marines opened fire and killed them. They subsequently swept through nearby houses, and killed 19 more people, including 5 women and 4 children.

After reading the news story, participants provided their attributions for the soldiers' behavior. It was possible for participants to either attribute the soldiers' actions as examples of "bad apples" (a personal inference) or take into account situational factors such as "the fog of War" (a situational inference). Consistent with the motivated reasoning hypothesis, conservatives made stronger situational attributions than liberals for the Marines' behavior—a reversal of the usual ideo-attribution effect.

**The Haditha Study Version 2.** Given that the results of the first Haditha study stand in such sharp contrast to so much research, it was especially important to replicate it. It would also be useful to compare whether these reactions are unique to authority figures, or if they generalize to explanations of non-authority figures who might have engaged in the same misconduct. The motivated reasoning hypothesis also predicts that value conflict should be driving the ideo-attribution effect and its reversal. To test whether value conflict plays a role in the ideo-attribution effect and its reversal, Morgan et al. (2010) designed a second study that manipulated whether the perpetrators of the Haditha slayings were Marines or Halliburton workers. In addition to measuring participants' attributions for the slayings, we also measured the relative salience of conservative values (e.g., respect for authority, security).

The reversal of the ideo-attribution effect emerged in the marine but not the Halliburton condition. A moderated mediational analysis indicated that conservatives' higher sensitivity to salient conservative values (e.g., respect authority, security) in the Marine but not the Halliburton condition mediated the effect of political orientation on attributions. Higher levels of conservatism were associated with heightened salience of conservative values in the Marine but not the Halliburton condition, which in turn explained the reversal of the usual ideo-attribution effect when explaining the Marines' but not the workers' behavior (Morgan et al.,

2010). In short, conservatives made stronger situational attributions than liberals did for the Marines' behavior because doing so was more consistent with salient conservative values.

**The Cougar Study.** Because this was a first demonstration of a reversal of the ideo-attribution effect, it was important to establish that it would emerge in other settings in which conservatives should be more motivated to make situational than personal attributions. To do so, Morgan et al. (2010) used another real world situation of possible authority misconduct. Police in the Roscoe Village neighborhood of Chicago called police in April of 2007 to report a large cat prowling the area. Police officers called to the scene discovered the cat was a 150-pound male cougar, that they subsequently tracked until it was cornered in a small alley. The police officers then opened fire, and shot the cougar more than a dozen times. Chicago residents engaged in a rather heated debate about whether the police responded appropriately to the incident. Police spokespersons claimed that the cougar posed a threat to public safety and could have injured or killed the police officers or others. Some residents, however, thought the police responded inappropriately and should have called in animal control officers who could have used a tranquilizer gun to capture the cougar instead of killing it (cougars are a protected species).

Participants were provided with a newspaper article that described the incident, and were asked to make attributions for the police officers' behavior, and to report the degree to which specific conservative (e.g., safety, law and order) and liberal (e.g., mercy, protection of nature) values affected their judgments of it. Conservatives made stronger situational attributions for the police officers' behavior than did liberals, replicating the reversal of the ideo-attribution effect observed in the Haditha studies. Moreover, the perceived relevance of security and environmental values fully mediated the effects of political orientation on attributions for the police officers' behavior. Conservatives perceived greater relevance of security and respect for

authority in this situation, which in turn predicted stronger situational attributions for the police officers' behavior. Liberals, in contrast, perceived greater relevance of mercy and environmental concerns, which in turn predicted stronger personal attributions for the police officers' behavior (Morgan et al., 2010).

In summary, the Haditha and cougar studies demonstrate that values-related reasoning motivates the ideo-attribution effect (and its reversal) and therefore supports the motivated reasoning account of the ideo-attribution effect. When conservative values conflict with making personal attributions, conservatives are more likely than liberals to make situational explanations for others' behavior. Conversely, when liberal values are more consistent with making personal than situational attributions for others' behavior, liberals are more likely than conservatives to make personal attributions for others' behavior.

### **Discussion**

The goal of this chapter was to review research that has tested competing cognitive and motivational explanations for liberal and conservative approaches to understanding and reacting to social and personal behavior. Taken together, the results begin to paint a relatively coherent picture of how liberals and conservatives arrive at different explanations for phenomena like crime, poverty, or obesity. Liberals and conservatives appear to see the world in relatively similar ways, and to be equally likely to make first pass personal attributions for the causes of others' actions or problems. However, liberals and conservatives diverge in their reactions when these first pass judgments conflict with their ideological values or goals. In short, the results are more consistent with the motivated reasoning hypothesis than either a dispositional or ideological script hypothesis. Although the results of all eight studies reviewed here were consistent with the motivated reasoning hypothesis (see the summary presented in Table 1), the

College Bowl and attitude attribution studies primarily ruled out the possibility that ideological differences in attributional proclivities are based either on stable underlying dispositional differences or the enactment of well-rehearsed ideological scripts. Although the results of these studies as a set could be explained in terms of motivated reasoning, the full implications of the motivated reasoning hypothesis were most persuasively tested by studies that demonstrated, for example, that the ideo-attribution effect disappeared under conditions of cognitive load, and in situations in which conservative values are more consistent with making a personal attribution the usual ideo-attribution effect reverses.

Research on the psychology of ideology and other trait-like characteristics tend to focus more on differences than similarities of the groups or types being studied. Finding out that liberals and conservatives, for example, are more similar than they are different may not have the sex appeal of a story line more along the lines of “conservatives are from Mars, and liberals are from Venus,” especially if the ways that the groups were thought to differ comfortably fits one’s preferred conclusions. Academics are not immune to either (a) the tendency to make the fundamental attribution error, that is, for their first pass attributions for something like an ideological difference to be focused more on dispositional than situational causes (Gilbert, 1998; Gilbert & Krull, 1988; Gilbert, Pelham, & Krull, 1988; Ross, 1977), (b) motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990), and therefore (c) accusations of possible liberal bias (e.g., Inbar & Lammers, 2012; Horowitz & Lehrer, 2002). It may be somewhat self-serving for political psychologists—who are mostly liberal (e.g., Inbar & Lammers, 2012; Horowitz & Lehrer, 2002; Klein & Western, 2004; Lindholm, Szelényi, Hurtado, & Korn, 2005)—to conclude that liberals are dispositionally more cognitively flexible, nimble, and sophisticated than their conservative counterparts.

The dispositional hypothesis, however, is not the only possible account for ideological differences such as the ideo-attribution effect. Although there may be personality characteristics or dispositions that lead to observed differences, it is important not to begin and end with a dispositional explanation. It is important to consider the possibility that, instead, something about the context may lead liberals and conservatives to respond in different ways, and if the contextual cues were reversed, so too would the effect. Most previous demonstrations of the ideo-attribution effect tested hypotheses in contexts where conservatives were more likely than liberals to be motivated to make dispositional explanations for others' behavior. Testing hypotheses across a broader array of contexts reveals that what appeared to be a stable individual difference in cognitive style was instead being driven by exactly the same cognitive and motivational processes: When conservatives' motivational priorities were more consistent with making a situational explanation, conservatives were more likely than liberals to make situational attributions.

Several other labs have similarly started to examine whether standing assumptions that conservatives are figuratively from Mars and liberals are from Venus hold when one tests hypotheses across a broader range of contexts. Social psychological research, for example, generally finds that people on the political right are more prejudiced and politically intolerant than those on the left of specific ethnic or sexual minorities (see Sibley & Duckitt, 2008 for a recent meta-analysis). Much like the ideo-attribution effect, the dominant explanation for this ideological divide has been that liberals and conservatives are predisposed to be respectively tolerant and intolerant (an explanation that paints liberals in a more attractive light than conservatives, e.g., Hodson & Busseri, 2012; Jost et al., 2003; Sibley & Duckitt, 2008). Other research, however, that tested hypotheses using a much broader range of possible targets of

prejudice or intolerance--including groups that liberals are more likely to dislike than conservatives-- found weak or no support for an ideological asymmetry in prejudice and political intolerance (Lambert & Chasteen, 1997; McCloskey & Chong, 1985; Yancey, 2010).

Conservatives do express more prejudice and intolerance than liberals when evaluating targets associated with liberal values or worldviews, or targets liberals are more inclined to want to protect than conservatives (e.g., pro-choice advocates and people on welfare). That said, liberals express more prejudice and intolerance than conservatives do when evaluating targets associated with conservative values or worldviews, or targets that conservatives are more inclined to want to protect than liberals (e.g., pro-life advocates and Tea Party supporters, Chambers, Schlenker, & Collisson, 2013; see also Crawford & Pilanski, in press; Wetherell, Brandt, & Reyna, 2013 for similar results). In short, explicit tests of the stimulus generalizability of previously assumed ideological asymmetries in prejudice and intolerance indicated that previous conclusions were premature and too one-sided (see Brandt, Reyna, Chambers, Crawford, & Wetherell, in press for a review).

New research also calls into question the common assumption that conservatives (more than liberals) believe that people should blindly obey authorities. Frimer, Wright, and Gaucher (2013) found that liberals and conservatives both see obedience as a moral good when the authority making the orders aligns with their own ideological views. People on the political right see obedience to conservative authorities to be morally good, but obedience to liberal authorities to be morally suspect. Conversely, people on the political left see obedience to liberal authorities as morally good, but obedience to conservative authorities as morally suspect. For reasons that are not yet well understood, however, both liberals and conservatives see the general idea of an authority as someone on the political right rather than the left. The general tendency for liberals

to be more skeptical about obeying authorities therefore has little to do with obedience per se, and everything to do with their skepticism about the authorities' ideological commitments.

Regardless, beneath the surface of liberals' and conservatives' beliefs about the moral appropriateness of obedience, is the same underlying process. Liberals and conservatives are equally "groupish" about authorities and obedience, so long as those authorities are members of their own ideological tribe.

In a similar fashion, many researchers have argued that conservatives are more willing than liberals to deny the validity of scientific evidence for politically relevant social and economic issues (e.g., Feygina, Jost, & Goldsmith, 2010; McCright & Dunlap, 2011a, 2011b; Mooney, 2012), most prominently, global warming (Dunlap, 2008; Gallup Poll, 2009). However, more recent social science research has found that people on both the left and the right are motivated to evaluate the credibility of scientific evidence in ways that bolster their ideological preferences (Kahan, 2013; Kahan, Jenkins-Smith, & Braman, 2011; Peterson, Skov, Serritzlew, & Ramsoy, 2013). For example, liberals often dispute scientific evidence that indicates that nuclear waste can be safely disposed without risk to the environment (Braman, Kahan, Slovic, Gastil, & Cohen, 2007; Jenkins-Smith, Silva, & Murray, 2009; Newport, 2012) and see scientists who cite evidence of the safety of nuclear waste disposal as less trustworthy than scientists who acknowledge risks (Kahan, Jenkins-Smith, & Braman, 2011). Liberals are also more likely than conservatives to be skeptical about the safety of the gas drilling technique known as fracking, and its possible effects on water quality (Mooney, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2012), despite considerable evidence of its safety with respect to the water table [e.g., after extensive study, the Environmental Protection Agency issued a 2004 report that concluded, "the injection of

hydraulic fracturing fluids into CBM (coalmethane) wells poses no threat to USDWs” (underground source of drinking water)”<sup>1</sup>.

The most persuasive evidence of ideological symmetry in science denial, however, is the finding that liberals and conservatives interpret raw scientific data—i.e., the very same numbers—in completely different ways depending on whether the findings bolster (e.g., for liberals, gun control decreases crime; for conservatives, gun control increases crime) or conflict with their preferred ideological conclusions, effects that do not emerge in a non-politicized control condition (Kahan, Peters, Dawson, & Slovic, 2013). In summary, science denial appears to be an equal opportunity sport driven by motivated reasoning: When conservative values or policy preferences conflict with scientific findings, conservatives are more likely than liberals to deny the validity, trustworthiness, or utility of that scientific evidence. Conversely, when liberal values or policy preferences conflict with scientific claims, liberals are more likely than conservatives to deny the science behind those claims.

In conclusion, although liberals and conservatives may differ in the priorities they hold dear, the same cognitive and motivational processes nonetheless drive the way they interpret and react to their social worlds. In most ways, conservatives and liberals are more similar than they are different, even if they find different groups, policies, or premises differentially preferable or objectionable. Both those on the political left and right are motivated to make attributions for others’ behavior in ways that are consistent with their values, to be prejudiced and intolerant of

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<sup>1</sup> Definitions of acronyms were not in the original quote. Liberal anxiety about fracking may have been fed by a documentary film *Gasland* (2010) in which a man was shown setting a match to his tap water and the water igniting into flame. Investigations of this and other cases depicted in the documentary by the Colorado Oil and Gas Information System (COGIS, a branch of the Colorado Department of Natural Resources) determined that the methane in the wells was not a result of oil or gas activity in the area (GOGCC statement, undated). Although correlational and still being studied, there is some emerging evidence that fracking may lead to an increase in earthquake activity (Ellsworth, 2013).

those who do not share their worldview, and to be skeptical of science that challenges their core assumptions. Before making claims about essential differences between liberals and conservatives it is especially important to carefully consider whether one has been sufficiently attentive to the contexts in which they have been observed, and to consider whether different patterns of results might be observed in contexts in which the politicized values are not salient, or when the motivational priorities of liberals and conservatives are reversed.

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Table 1.

*Study results that were consistent with the dispositional, ideological script, and motivated reasoning hypotheses.*

	Dispositional	Ideological script	Motivated reasoning
College Bowl	✓		✓
Attitude attribution		✓	✓
Repeated prompt			✓
AZT allocation			✓
Haditha I			✓
Haditha II			✓
Cougar			✓



