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On Attributing Negative Motives to Others Who Disagree With Our Opinions

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The research explores the tendency for people to attribute negative motives to others who hold an attitude position that is discrepant from their own. In Studies 1 and 2, American and Canadian respondents indicated their perceptions of U.S. President Bush's motives for initiating war in Iraq. Consistent with the proposed bias, respondents who disagreed with the war attributed more selfish motivations than did those who supported the war. Study 3 revealed a similar bias when respondents rated the motives of the general citizenry concerning their attitudes about the war, and Study 4 provided evidence of the bias on different attitudinal issues (e.g., abortion and gay marriage). Study 4 also indicated that biased attributions of motive were primarily confined to respondents who were highly involved in the attitude issue. Discussion centers on naïve realism, social identity concerns, and attitude justification as relevant underlying theoretical factors.

Keywords: *interpersonal perception; attribution; ingroup; outgroup; egocentrism; intention; motive*

> The conflict with Iraq is about weapons of mass destruction, Rumsfeld insisted. "It has nothing to do with oil, literally nothing to do with oil."
>
> —Donald Rumsfeld, U.S. Secretary of Defense (November 15, 2002, CBSNEWS)

> "It is clearly a decision that is motivated by George W. Bush's desire to please the arms and oil industries in the United States of America."
>
> —Nelson Mandela, speaking about plans for the United States to attack Iraq (September 10, 2002, MSNBC/*Newsweek*)

The two preceding quotes suggest that partisans on opposite sides of an issue sometimes attribute different motives to a prominent political figure. In general, do those in support of the leader's stance on the issue cite socially acceptable—even altruistic—motives for the proposed action, whereas do those opposed to the proposed action denigrate the motives of the leader? A tendency of this sort would be consistent with a guiding theme of research in social psychology: People actively construct their perception of reality in accord with their own subjective perspective, definitions, and needs (Hastorf & Cantril, 1954; Ross & Nisbett, 1991). In line with this notion of subjective construal, this article explores the tendency to attribute relatively negative motives to others who disagree with our opinions on social issues. As described below, this tendency is relevant to a variety of theoretical issues, including egocentrism (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958), naïve realism (Pronin, Gilovich, & Ross, 2004; Ross & Ward, 1996), social identity (Brewer & Brown, 1998; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), and attitude justification processes (Aronson, 1969; Festinger, 1957; Steele, 1988).

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NAÏVE REALISM

Egocentrism

In Piaget's seminal work, egocentrism referred to children's failure to realize that their own perspective may differ from that of others (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958). As such, the term referred to a lack of awareness of other points of view. In contrast, social psychologists have often employed the term to refer to the biasing effect that the self plays in judgments about others. For example, people may use the self as a benchmark to make biased inferences about the athleticism of others (Dunning & Hayes, 1996) or the traits and attitudes of their romantic partners (Murray, Holmes, Bellavia, & Griffin, 2002). In this article, we will employ the term of egocentrism in a manner that roughly corresponds to this latter sense of the word. Our specific proposal is that the perceiver's own attitudinal position tends to bias judgments about the motives that underlie the attitudinal positions of others. In particular, perceivers tend to attribute negative motives to others who disagree with their opinions, whereas they attribute more positive motives to those who agree with their opinions. We will use the term "egocentric motive attribution" to refer to this pattern. As described below, a rich tradition of research on naïve realism supports this expectation (Pronin et al., 2004; Ross & Ward, 1996; see also Epley & Caruso, 2004).

Biased Attributions Concerning Knowledge Acquisition

Ross and Ward (1996) suggest that naïve realism in adults reflects the last vestiges of the kind of egocentrism that is found in children (Epley, Morewedge, & Keysar, 2004; Inhelder & Piaget, 1958). There are three related tenets of naïve realism: (a) believing that one perceives events objectively (as they really are); (b) believing that other rationally minded individuals will see things similarly; and (c) believing that the failure of others to see things similarly reflects a lack of information, laziness, irrationality, or bias (by ideology or self-interest) on the part of others. According to this perspective, partisans on either side of the U.S./Iraq war issue started from the assumption that their view of the conflict was based on reality and they were dismayed to find that others held contrary opinions. Naïve realism implies that the difference of opinion might initially be attributed to factors related to knowledge acquisition, including ignorance, misinformation, and irrationality. But if information about the relevant issue is widespread in the media (as was the case concerning the war in Iraq), people will take a harder stance toward those who disagree with their opinions. Ross and his colleagues suggest that such dissenters will be viewed as either biased by ideology or as having self-interested motives. As described below, an important study by Robinson, Keltner, Ward, and Ross (1995) provided strong support for the first of these assumptions.

Robinson et al. (1995) asked college students to characterize the bases of other people's attitudes toward controversial social issues (e.g., abortion and racial conflict). As naïve realism would predict, the participants believed that their own views were less influenced by ideology or political views than the views of other people, including those on their own side of the issue (Pronin et al., 2004; Pronin, Lin, & Ross, 2002). Of greater importance for this article, however, participants believed that "people on the other side (of the issue) in particular" were more influenced by political ideology, at the expense of the available facts (Robinson et al., 1995, p. 414). Participants perceived their political opponents as rigid ideologues, blind to facts that should be readily apparent.

Perceptions of Motive

Ross and Ward (1996) imply not only that perceivers will view their political opponents as biased in terms of knowledge acquisition (seeing them as uninformed, closed-minded ideologues) but also as biased in terms of their motives (Heider, 1958; Malle, 1999; Reeder & Trafimow, in press). As described below, the present research contributes to the literature on naïve realism by focusing on how people with opposing attitudes attribute motives to one another. Making inferences about the motives of others is a common occurrence in everyday living—whether it involves inferring the motives of the President of the United States or divining the meaning of a smile from an attractive stranger (Read & Miller, 1993; Reeder, Kumar, Hesson-McInnis, & Trafimow, 2002; Reeder, Vonk, Ronk, Ham, & Lawrence, 2004; Wohl & Reeder, 2004). Attributions of motive are important because they reflect the perceiver's understanding of what a person means in conversation, how the person's actions fit together, and why the behavior occurred in the first place. In short, if we know what motivates a person, we can predict the person's actions and we know whether we can trust the person.

How do perceivers go about inferring the motives of others (Reeder & Trafimow, in press)? When the evidence about other people's attitudes, traits, and motives is ambiguous, research suggests that perceivers often will project their own characteristics onto others (Ames, 2004; Murray et al., 2002). But what happens when the evidence about others is less ambiguous? Perceivers in our research were directly informed about the attitude of others toward the war in Iraq and were asked to make judgments about the motives underlying those attitudes. As described above, naïve realism implies that people are likely to attribute negative motives to others who hold divergent opinions. In particular, we suggest that

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partisans will tend to see their opposition as having ulterior motives centered on self-interest. Why should a self-interest motive be privileged? Earlier, we noted that when the naïve realist confronts evidence that others hold discrepant opinions, he or she will cast about searching for an explanation. Miller provided compelling evidence that people in Western countries view the self-interest motive as widespread (Miller, 1999; Miller & Ratner, 1998). Given the salience of this motive—and its negative valence—we suggest that perceivers are likely to see selfish motives as a plausible explanation for their opponent's behavior. In other words, although perceivers tend to think that self-interest is pervasive, they may be especially likely to attribute it to those who hold divergent opinions. In summary, research on naïve realism provides a strong theoretical rationale for our predictions regarding egocentric motive attribution. Below, we examine two other perspectives on our predictions.

SELF-CATEGORIZATION AND ATTITUDE JUSTIFICATION PROCESSES

Although past literature suggests naïve realism as an explanation for egocentric motive attribution (Pronin et al., 2004; Ross & Ward, 1996), in this article we aim to broaden the discussion of relevant theoretical factors. Of particular interest are perspectives that view people as motivated to maintain a positive social identity. Turner et al.'s (1987) influential self-categorization theory, which is an outgrowth of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), suggests that people seek to differentiate their own group from other groups along dimensions of value. Such comparisons often enhance favorable differences between the ingroup and the outgroup (Bar-Tal, 2004; Brewer & Brown, 1998). For example, people tend to attribute the negative actions of outgroups to dispositional causes, whereas they tend to attribute the same actions by the ingroup to situational causes. Pettigrew (1979; see also Hewstone, 1990) called this tendency the ultimate attribution error. Note, however, that the findings described above pertain to intergroup comparisons, whereas we are concerned with attitudinal similarity in this article. Can attitudinal similarity (involving comparisons between those with whom one agrees vs. those with whom one disagrees) serve as a basis for intergroup differentiation? Research by Kenworthy and Miller (2002) suggests that attitude similarity can play this role. They found that attitudes do indeed function as group boundaries, such that those who share attitudes are perceived as a coherent, unified group. The self-categorization perspective, then, suggests that people who hold attitudes similar to oneself (the ingroup) will be seen as holding more veridical perceptions of the world and as possessing more positive motives than those who hold contrary attitudes (the outgroup).

Self-categorization theory implies that the motivation to maintain a positive self-evaluation operates at different levels of abstraction, sometimes involving intergroup comparison, but at other times involving efforts to see one's own unique, "personal" identity as superior to that of others (Turner et al., 1987, p. 62). Such efforts at the individual level may lead people to justify or defend their attitudes, particularly when confronted with others who hold contrary beliefs. This possibility is consistent with research in the tradition of cognitive dissonance theory (Aronson, 1969; Festinger, 1957), which emphasizes the importance of attitude justification processes in everyday life. Indeed, related theoretical analyses at the individual level suggest that people may employ techniques such as attitude justification to bolster the integrity of the self (Steele, 1988). In short, our predictions regarding biased attributions of motive are supported by several different theoretical approaches, including naïve realism, social identity concerns, and processes of attitude justification. The studies reported below tested these predictions across a variety of settings.

STUDY 1

In Study 1, a sample of American college students were asked to indicate their perceptions of President Bush's motives for using force to overthrow the government of Iraq in 2003. Guided by our hypothesis of egocentric motive attribution, our main prediction was that respondents opposed to the war would attribute more self-serving motivation to President Bush than would those in favor of the war.

Method

PARTICIPANTS

The participants were 105 male ($n = 41$) and female ($n = 64$) college students from a midwestern, American university. The participants received extra credit in an introductory-level psychology course for filling out the questionnaire. They ranged in age from 18 to 44 years, with a median of 19 years, and they reported political affiliations as follows: Democrat (32%), Republican (28%), Other (24%), and Independent (17%). Just more than half of the participants indicated that they supported the war (51%), whereas 25% opposed the war and 24% were undecided.

MATERIALS AND PROCEDURE

Data from the first three studies in this article were collected in April 2003 as U.S. military forces were closing in on Baghdad. A questionnaire titled "Why We Are at War" was administered in a group setting. At the top of the first page, participants read a brief statement that asked them to list President Bush's reasons for fighting the Iraq War:

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> President Bush believes that the U.S. should use force to overthrow the current government of Iraq. This survey asks you to think about his reasons for wanting to fight the war. In the spaces below, please list the reasons why you think he wants to fight the war.

Seven lines were provided for participants to list reasons for President Bush's actions. By providing this open-ended format, we allowed participants to express themselves in their own words, without steering them toward particular types of reasons. The participants then rated President Bush on several scales that were designed to measure attributions of self-serving motivation. The first asked if President Bush was motivated *more by ethical principles* (1) or *more by his own selfish interests* (7), whereas the second asked if President Bush was motivated *more by safety and self-defense* (1) or *more to see the United States gain power* (7).

The next two pages of the questionnaire contained a more specific list of potential reasons for President Bush's actions in Iraq. The list of potential reasons was drawn from a wide variety of media accounts concerning the war. For each reason listed, participants indicated "how likely it is a reason for President Bush's actions" (1 = *not at all likely*, 7 = *very likely*). One of these pages listed reasons promoted by the Bush administration and its supporters (e.g., He believes that Iraq has [or soon will have] weapons of mass destruction). A second page listed reasons commonly provided by critics of the Bush administration (e.g., He wants America to control the oil in Iraq). The order of these two pages was counterbalanced across participants. Finally, participants were asked, "Are you in favor of the war in Iraq?" (yes, no, or undecided) and were asked to indicate their political identification (Democrat, Republican, Independent, or Other).

Results

OPEN-ENDED RESPONSES

Coding. A preliminary tabulation of the various listed reasons suggested that the vast majority of responses fell into six categories. On average, respondents generated 2.2 reasons for President Bush's actions. The two most frequently mentioned reasons were self-defense (e.g., we need protection from weapons of mass destruction) and aiming to do good (e.g., liberate Iraq and bring democracy), which represent relatively positive motives for aggression (Carpenter & Darley, 1978; Miller, 2001; Reeder et al., 2002). The next two most frequent reasons, however, represent relatively negative motives for aggression: proactive aggression (e.g., U.S. gaining power and controlling Iraq's oil) and hidden motives (e.g., take the focus off the economy). Two additional motives emerged that were less clearly evaluative: revenge (e.g., for 9/11 or for an earlier assassination attempt on President Bush's father) and to punish Saddam Hussein (e.g., Saddam violated U.N. Charters and committed crimes). A primary coder (who was blind to the respondent's view of the war) used a dichotomous coding scheme (1 = referred to a motive vs. 0 = did not refer to a motive) to provide ratings of these motives for all participants. A secondary coder provided similar ratings for 50 participants. Reliability proved to be adequate (percentage agreement for the six motives = 84%, 88%, 80%, 88%, 98%, and 82%, respectively). Consequently, the data reported below were taken from the primary coder.

Open-ended perceptions of motives. Preliminary analyses indicated that significant effects of gender and order of questions were rare in the analyses conducted for this article. Consequently, a decision was made to collapse the data across these factors. We expected that those in favor of the war would cite positive, altruistic motives for Bush's actions, whereas we expected that those opposed to the war would cite ulterior, self-serving motives. Table 1 indicates strong support for these expectations. Those in favor of the war listed self-defense and "doing good" as the main reasons for President Bush's actions. In contrast, these two motives were listed less frequently by those opposed to the war (or those who were undecided), $\chi^2(2) = 10.51$ and 16.39, ps < .005. The most frequently listed motives for those who were opposed to the war focused on proactive aggression (i.e., self-serving motives such as controlling Iraq's oil) and hidden motives, which were listed less frequently by those in favor of the war (or those who were undecided), $\chi^2(2) = 14.46$ and 14.57, ps < .001. In short, the open-ended responses provided strong evidence of egocentric motive attribution.

STRUCTURED RATINGS OF PERCEIVED MOTIVES

Perceptions of self-serving motives. When pursuing the war, was President Bush motivated more by ethical principles or more by selfishness? Respondents who were opposed to the war saw Bush as more motivated by selfishness (and less by ethical principle) ($M = 6.07$) than did those who were in favor of the war ($M = 2.81$) or who were undecided ($M = 4.25$), $F(2, 102) = 54.78$, $p < .001$. Similarly, when asked to choose between self-defense and (wanting to gain) power as motives, respondents who were opposed to the war saw the desire for power as a more compelling motive ($M = 5.53$) than did those who were in favor of the war ($M = 2.59$) or who were undecided ($M = 3.88$), $F(2, 102) = 43.71$, $p < .001$.

Reactive versus proactive motives for aggression. Respondents rated the likelihood that President Bush was motivated by each of 13 different motives, including motives frequently promoted by the Bush administration and

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TABLE 1: Percentage of American Participants Listing Each Motive for President Bush as a Function of Participants' Own Support for the War, Study 1

Motive	*Favor War*	*Undecided*	*Oppose War*	*Total*
Self-defense*	74	72	39	65
Aiming to do good*	70	36	27	51
Proactive aggression*	30	56	73	47
Hidden motive*	11	32	50	26
Revenge	11	28	31	20
Punish Saddam	15	12	4	11
Other	6	0	4	4
*n*s	54	26	25	

NOTE: Chi-square analyses were statistically significant for motives followed by an asterisk, all *p*s < .005. The percentages in each column sum to more than 100% because respondents typically listed more than one reason.

those cited by their critics. In an effort to determine the underlying structure of these ratings, we subjected them to a principal component analysis with varimax rotation. Two interpretable factors emerged that we labeled proactive reasons for aggression and reactive reasons for aggression, respectively. Six items with the highest loadings on the first factor were averaged to form a proactive aggression scale (coefficient alpha = .90). The items on this scale suggested negative, self-serving motivations for aggression (e.g., He wants the United States to dominate the world). The four items with the highest loadings on the second factor were averaged to form a reactive aggression scale (coefficient alpha = .69). The items on this second scale suggested a (more positive) self-defense motive for aggression (e.g., He wants to stop Iraq from spreading terrorism). In each case, the selected items loaded greater than .60 on their respective factors.

We then conducted a 3 (support for war: for, against, undecided) × 2 (aggression type: proactive vs. reactive) mixed-model ANOVA, with repeated measures on type of aggression. This analysis revealed significant main effects of both type of aggression, $F(1, 102) = 87.37$, $p < .001$, and support for war, $F(2, 102) = 5.14$, $p < .01$. Accordingly, respondents (in general) gave much higher likelihood ratings to reactive motives for aggression ($M = 5.98$) than proactive motives for aggression ($M = 4.09$). In addition, respondents who were against the war ($M = 5.37$) gave somewhat higher ratings (in general) than did those who were in favor of the war ($M = 4.84$) or who were undecided ($M = 5.11$). Of greater importance, the predicted interaction between support for war and aggression type was significant, $F(2, 102) = 39.45$, $p < .001$. As displayed in Figure 1, respondents who were opposed to the war tended to perceive more proactive motivation for the aggression than did those who were in favor of the war (*M*s = 5.46 vs. 3.33, respectively). In contrast, those who were opposed to the war perceived less reactive motivation than those in favor of the war (*M*s = 5.27 vs. 6.35, respectively). In sum, these ratings—across a variety of different scales—provided further evidence that antiwar respondents were more inclined to attribute negative motives to President Bush than were prowar respondents.

ATTITUDINAL POSITION ON THE WAR VERSUS POLITICAL AFFILIATION AS A DETERMINANT OF MOTIVE ATTRIBUTION

Our findings could potentially be driven by either one's own attitude on an issue or one's identification with a political party. For example, Republicans might be more willing than Democrats to attribute positive motives to a Republican president. Indeed, Republicans did attribute less selfishness to the President and perceived him as having less motivation for power (*M*s = 2.61 and 2.96) than did Democrats (*M*s = 4.27 and 4.21), *F*s(1, 59) = 15.77 and 8.26, *p*s < .01, respectively. Note, however, that these patterns were generally weaker than those found for respondents' own position on the war. To examine this issue more systematically, we conducted a pair of multiple regression analyses that predicted the above two measures of perceived motive as a function of support for the war (in favor vs. opposed), political affiliation (Democrat vs. Republican), and the interaction of these variables. In the first step of a hierarchical analysis, support for war and political affiliation were entered simultaneously. Support for the war made a highly significant contribution to both perceived self-interest, $B = .68$, $t(45) = 6.51$, $p < .001$, and motivation for power, $B = .64$, $t(45) = 5.64$, $p < .001$. In contrast, political affiliation was not significant in either analysis, *B*s = .18 and .18, *t*s(45) = 1.71 and 1.59, *p*s < .10 and .15, respectively. The interaction did not add significantly to the prediction of either of the perceived motives. These analyses indicate that political affiliation did not make an independent contribution to our findings.

The above conclusion also was supported when we examined the cases where own attitude and political affiliation were at odds (i.e., Democrats who were in favor of the war and Republicans who were against it). For example, the 13 Democrats who supported the war tended to see President Bush much as Republicans did, as motivated by ethical principles and self-defense (*M*s = 2.85 and 3.08). Likewise, the two Republicans who were against the war tended to see the President much as Democrats did, as motivated by selfishness and a desire for power (*M*s = 4.5 and 4.5). Although the *N*s are small in these comparisons, the data are consistent with the idea that our findings were determined mainly by respondents' own positions on the war, rather than by their political affiliation.

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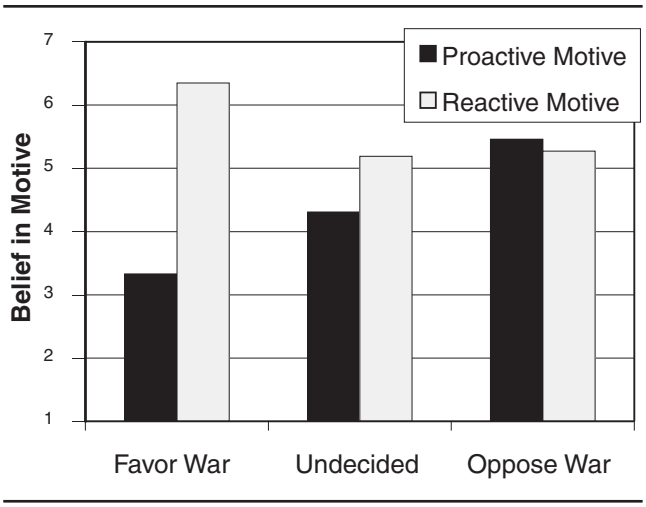

Figure 1 Perceptions of motive as a function of aggression type (proactive motivation vs. reactive motivation) and participants' own support for the war, Study 1.
NOTE: Higher numbers signify greater belief in the motive.

Discussion

Open-ended listings of motive revealed strong evidence of egocentric motive attribution. Respondents who favored the war in Iraq perceived relatively positive motives for President Bush's action, such as motivations of self-defense and wanting to "do good." In sharp contrast, those who opposed the war in Iraq perceived relatively negative motives in President Bush, involving proactive reasons for aggression and hidden motives. Structured ratings in Study 1 provided additional evidence of egocentric motive attribution. To the extent that respondents disagreed with President Bush's position on the war, they perceived him as motivated by selfishness (rather than ethical principles) and as motivated by a desire for power (rather than to defend the United States from threat). For example, such respondents thought it likely that the President's aim was to control the oil in Iraq and to dominate the world. Additional analyses suggest that respondents' own position on the war was a more important determinant of motive attribution than was political affiliation.

STUDY 2

The debate about Iraq extended to traditional U.S. allies, many of whom openly opposed the U.S. action. Study 2 sought to determine the presence of egocentric motive attribution in a sample of Canadians. Undoubtedly, Canadians also passed judgment about President Bush's motives. But compared to Americans, Canadians may have been less involved in the war issue. By leading the attack on Iraq, Americans were putting their military and economic resources at risk. In addition, many Americans had family or close friends in the military who were placed in harm's way. In contrast, Canadians played virtually no role in the Iraq war. If direct involvement (or threat) is crucial to egocentric motive attribution, Canadian respondents should show weaker patterns than the American sample did in Study 1.

Method

PARTICIPANTS AND MATERIALS

The participants were 80 male (n = 34) and female (n = 46) college students from a large, Canadian university. They ranged in age from 18 to 40 years, with a median of 19 years. They reported political affiliations as follows: Liberal (45%), Alliance (16%), Progressive Conservative (PC) (8%), New Democratic Party (NDP) (8%), and Other (24%).[1] In contrast to the American sample, only a minority of the Canadian sample supported the war (16%), whereas 56% were opposed to the war and 28% were undecided. Participants received a nearly identical questionnaire to that employed in Study 1.[2] The only difference is that the categories of political affiliation were changed to reflect the political parties in Canada.

Results

PERCEPTIONS OF SELF-SERVING MOTIVES

Replicating the findings of Study 1, respondents who were opposed to the war saw Bush as more motivated by selfishness (and less by ethical principle) (M = 6.11) than did those who favored the war (M = 3.38) or were undecided (M = 4.82), $F(2, 77) = 29.70$, $p < .001$. Respondents who were opposed to the war also saw power as a more compelling motive (M = 5.87) than did those who favored the war (M = 3.08) or were undecided (M = 3.88), $F(2, 77) = 24.78$, $p < .001$. As in Study 1, these two analyses accounted for a large percentage of the variance (44% and 39% of the variance, respectively).

REACTIVE VERSUS PROACTIVE MOTIVES FOR AGGRESSION

Ratings of the 13 motives for President Bush's actions were subjected to a principal component analysis with varimax rotation. The first two factors corresponded to reactive and proactive reasons for aggression, respectively. The four items with the highest loadings on each factor were selected to form scales representing reactive and proactive motives (coefficient alphas = .83 and .86, respectively). A 3 (support for war) × 2 (aggression type) mixed-model ANOVA revealed the expected interaction between support for war and aggression type, $F(1, 77) = 20.43$, $p < .001$. Respondents who were opposed to the war perceived more proactive motivation for the aggression (M = 5.92) than did those who were in favor of the war (M = 3.92). In contrast, those who were opposed to

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the war tended to perceive less reactive motivation than those in favor of the war (*M*s = 4.99 vs. 6.12, respectively). Participants who were undecided about the war fell between these extremes (*M*s = 5.07 and 5.75, for proactive and reactive motivation, respectively).

Discussion

Prior to conducting Study 2, we assumed that Canadians would be less involved in the war issue than Americans. Nevertheless, the basic findings of Study 1 (conducted with Americans) were replicated in our Canadian sample. Respondents who were in favor of the war perceived Bush as guided by moral principles and as motivated to protect the United States from the threat posed by Saddam Hussein. In contrast, those who were opposed to the war perceived Bush as having a self-serving motive to increase the power of the United States. The magnitude of these effects was large and comparable to that observed with the American sample. These findings, therefore, suggest that direct involvement (in the war) is not central to the results. Nevertheless, the importance of involvement cannot be discounted because it is likely that most Canadians were at least indirectly (or psychologically) involved in the war debate. Indeed, research indicates that people often feel strongly about issues that do not affect their own personal outcomes (Kinder & Sears, 1981). We will return to the issue of involvement in Study 4 of this article.

The strength of the relationship that we observed between attitudes toward the war and attributions of motive (in both the American and the Canadian sample) could be due to its bidirectional nature. On one hand, our preferred causal interpretation—that attitudes toward the war determined attributions of motive—may be the correct one. On the other hand, the opposite causal sequence is plausible as well: Attributions about motive (from earlier initiatives of the Bush administration) may have determined attitudes toward the war. In other words, if respondents attributed positive motives to President Bush, they might have been predisposed to support his war initiatives. Studies 3 and 4 are a step toward addressing the issue of bidirectionality.

STUDY 3

In Study 3, we surveyed a sample of American college students about their perceptions of the motives of the general public rather than a well-known figure such as President Bush. Respondents were asked to judge the motives of their fellow citizens who did and did not support the war. By switching the impression target from that of a well-known individual to that of a group, we hoped to address two issues. The first concerns the problem of bidirectional causality. Prior to the war in Iraq, it seems unlikely that the participants in our studies held strong opinions about the motives of Americans who might support or oppose a war in Iraq at some future time. Consequently, it seems implausible that such opinions about motive could determine peoples' position on the war. A more likely sequence is that people formed an attitude toward the war and then passed judgment on other citizens who did or did not support the war. If Study 3 supports our predictions about ulterior motive attribution, the more likely causal sequence is that attitudes toward the war shaped perceptions of motive, rather than the reverse sequence.

The second issue concerns differences in impressions formed of individuals versus groups (Hamilton & Sherman, 1996). Many war protesters focused their anger on President Bush rather than on groups who supported the war. The question of interest, then, is whether perceivers will demonstrate biased motive attribution when attributing motives to groups (who do or do not support the war). Prior to conducting our studies, we suspected that the answer would be "yes." Differences in impressions of individual and groups are attenuated to the extent that the group is viewed as a coherent whole, or entity (Hamilton & Sherman, 1996). Indeed, research indicates that attitudinally constituted groups (such as pro-life supporters in the abortion debate) tend to be perceived as a coherent unit (Kenworthy & Miller, 2002), suggesting that differences between attributions for groups and individuals would not be expected. Consequently, although Study 3 involved impressions of a group (as opposed to an individual), we expected that participants would attribute negative motives to others with whom they disagreed.

Finally, Study 3 explored the possibility that persons with whom one disagrees may be perceived as not consciously aware of their own motives (Maselli & Altrocchi, 1969). Such a finding would be consistent with naïve realism. Naïve realism suggests that we expect others to see the situation as we do—provided that others are in touch with "reality." One way that others could be out of touch involves a failure to recognize, or be consciously aware of, their own motives. Study 3 included an additional measure to tap this possibility.

Method

PARTICIPANTS

The participants were 95 male ($n = 25$) and female ($n = 70$) college students from a midwestern American university. The participants received extra credit in an introductory-level psychology course for filling out the questionnaire. They ranged in age from 18 to 32 years, with a median of 20 years. Their political affiliations were as follows: Democrat (42%), Republican (25%), Independent (18%), and Other (14%). Just less than half of

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the participants supported the war (48%), whereas 24% opposed the war and 27% were undecided.

MATERIALS AND PROCEDURE

A questionnaire titled "Attitudes Toward the War" was administered in a group setting. For approximately half of the participants, the survey inquired about participants' perceptions of Americans "who are strongly in favor of the war in Iraq." For the remaining participants, the survey asked for perceptions of Americans "who are strongly against the war in Iraq." The major dependent measure involved a variation of the forced-choice item employed in the previous studies:

> With regard to people who are strongly in favor of (against) the war in Iraq, do you think they are more motivated by ethical principles? Or are they more motivated by their own selfish interests?

The endpoints of the scale were labeled *motivated by ethical principles* (1) and *motivated by selfish interests* (7). We also sought to broaden our assessment of perceptions of self-serving motives. To accomplish this goal, additional questions asked if people who are strongly in favor of (against) the war in Iraq have a hidden agenda, are very moral people, have helpful motives, and are consciously aware of their own motives, in that order. The endpoints of each scale were labeled *strongly disagree* (1) and *strongly agree* (7).

Results

The question of interest in Study 3 is whether people tend to impugn the motives of their fellow citizens with whom they disagree. As shown in Figure 2, the respondents answered this question in the affirmative. A 3 (support for war) × 2 (impression target: citizens who support the war vs. citizens who oppose the war) between-participants analysis of variance revealed a significant interaction between support for the war and impression target, $F(2, 89) = 18.24$, $p < .001$. When judging the motives of citizens who favored the war, respondents who supported the war perceived less self-interest (and more ethical principles) than did respondents who were opposed to the war. In contrast, when judging the motives of citizens who opposed the war, respondents who favored the war perceived more self-interest compared to respondents who opposed the war. In short, respondents believed that those who disagreed with their own position on the war were biased by self-interest.

The four measures depicted in Table 2 also displayed significant interactions between support for the war and impression target, Fs(2, 89) = 19.61, 10.66, 8.15, and 11.15, ps < .001. In general, citizens who were in favor of the war were perceived in positive terms by respondents who also supported the war: they were seen as having relatively helpful motives, as not having a hidden agenda, as moral, and as consciously aware of their own motives. In contrast, respondents who were opposed to the war perceived this same group of citizens as relatively lacking in these qualities. Likewise, citizens who were opposed to the war were perceived in much more positive terms by respondents who also opposed the war, compared to those who supported the war.

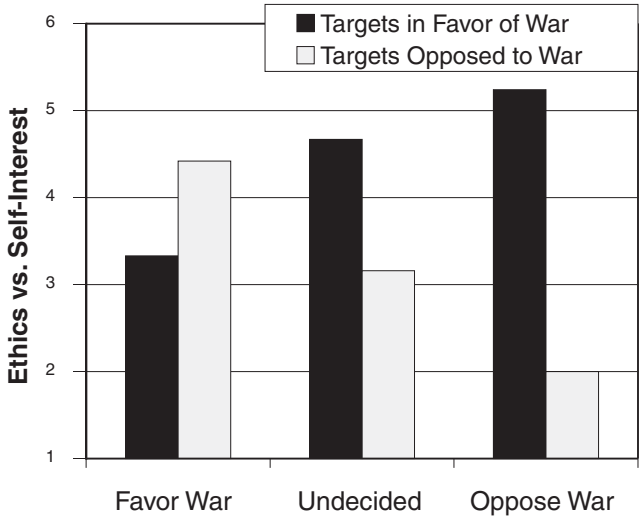

Figure 2 Perceptions of ethical principles versus self-interest motive as a function of impression target (American citizens in favor of war vs. American citizens opposed to war) and participants' own support for the war, Study 3.
NOTE: Higher numbers signify greater attributed self-interest.

Discussion

The findings of Study 3 are a step toward disentangling the issue of causal direction. The results suggest that our American sample formed an attitude toward the war in Iraq and then passed judgment on their fellow citizens who either agreed or disagreed on the issue. The opposite causal sequence—that respondents first made motive attributions about other citizens and, subsequently, decided whether to support the war—is less plausible. Study 3 also suggests that egocentric motive attribution extends beyond attributions about familiar individuals, such as President Bush. Respondents in Study 3 attributed biased motives to their fellow citizens (groups) with whom they disagreed. Finally, respondents viewed persons with whom they disagreed as not only out of touch with reality but as out of touch with themselves. Specifically, such persons were seen as not consciously aware of their own motives.

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TABLE 2: Perceived Motives as a Function of Impression Target and American Participants' Own Support for the War, Study 3

	Impression Targets Favoring War			*Impression Targets Opposing War*		
Motive	*Favor*	*Undecided*	*Oppose*	*Favor*	*Undecided*	*Oppose*
Helpful motive						
M	5.19	4.93	3.71	3.37	4.46	5.83
SD	1.04	0.80	1.26	1.16	1.37	1.17
Hidden agenda						
M	2.70	3.33	4.71	4.11	3.00	2.50
SD	1.10	1.35	1.49	1.66	1.41	1.97
Moral						
M	5.00	4.67	3.76	3.58	4.73	5.00
SD	1.00	1.18	1.15	3.58	1.42	1.55
Not consciously aware						
M	3.11	4.47	5.24	4.05	4.18	2.83
SD	1.34	1.30	1.20	0.911	0.98	2.23
ns	27	15	17	19	11	6

NOTE: Higher mean ratings signify greater agreement on a 7-point scale.

STUDY 4

Study 4 addressed several concerns regarding the generality of our findings. First, because our earlier studies focused exclusively on the issue of the Iraq war, it is possible that our findings are unique to that issue. For example, liberals were more likely than conservatives to oppose the Iraq war, and this difference might have played some role in our data. Another potential problem is that motives for the war in Iraq were prominently discussed in the media during the time we collected our data. When making attributions of motive, perhaps our participants were merely parroting back the particular aspects of the nightly news with which they agreed. Given the alternative explanations discussed above, we decided to investigate attributions of motive on two different attitude dimensions: abortion and gay marriage.

A second aim of Study 4 was to investigate the role of issue involvement more systematically. Although Canadians (who were not directly involved in the Iraq issue) showed biased attribution in Study 2, we did not measure issue involvement directly. In Study 4, we created a measure of issue involvement and assessed its relationship to attributions about motive. We predicted that biased attributions would be stronger among participants with higher levels of issue involvement. Study 4 also extended the analysis by including other measures of naïve realism. In addition to assessing attributions of motive, we included measures related to knowledge acquisition (e.g., perceptions that others are ignorant, irrational, and closed-minded). Given that naïve realism implies a sequence whereby differences of opinion are initially attributed to factors related to knowledge acquisition (Pronin et al., 2002; Ross & Ward, 1996), we expected these measures to show relatively strong evidence of naïve realism. Finally, our earlier studies required participants to choose between self-interest and ethical motivation in a forced-choice format. Study 4 included this forced choice item but also added individual scales to assess perceptions of these two motives separately.

Method

PARTICIPANTS AND MATERIALS

The participants were 165 college students (81 men, 84 women) from a midwestern, American university. They ranged in age from 18 to 43 years, with a median of 19 years. Participants were randomly assigned to receive questionnaires on the topic of either abortion or gay marriage, and within each topic, they were randomly assigned to judge target persons who either supported or opposed the issue. For example, the measure of perceived self-interest had the following wording for the abortion issue: With regard to their position on abortion, to what extent do you think people who are pro-choice (pro-life) are motivated by self-interest? The endpoints of the scale were labeled *not at all motivated by self-interest* (1) and *completely motivated by self-interest (for reasons that benefit themselves)* (7). A similar item tapped perceptions of ethical motivation. The remaining scales (in the order listed) consisted of statements that the target persons have a hidden agenda, have helpful (altruistic) motives, are not consciously aware of their own motives, are irrational, are knowledgeable, and are open-minded. The endpoints of each scale were labeled *strongly disagree* (1) and *strongly agree* (7). Participants then indicated their own attitude on the target issue: *pro-life* or *oppose gay marriage* (1) and *pro-choice* or *support gay marriage* (7). Finally, they responded to two direct measures of issue involvement: "How important is this issue to you personally?" with endpoints *not at all* (1) and *very important* (7) and "How likely are you to change your opinions on this issue?" with endpoints *not at all* (1) and *very likely* (7).

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Results and Discussion

Because the analysis of Study 4 included the additional factors of attitude issue (abortion vs. gay marriage) and issue involvement, we took two steps to streamline the analysis. First, participants were categorized according to whether they judged target persons with similar attitudes versus dissimilar attitudes. Participants who checked scale points 1 through 3 on the own attitude scale were classified as pro-life (oppose gay marriage) and those who checked scale points 5 through 7 were classified as pro-choice (support gay marriage). Participants who checked the midpoint of the scale were eliminated from the analysis (n = 29). Then, based on their own attitude, the remaining participants were classified according to whether they judged similar targets (n = 59) versus dissimilar targets (n = 77).

Second, we developed a continuous index of issue involvement based on attitude extremity, rated importance of the issue, and likelihood of attitude change. Attitude extremity was computed by taking the absolute difference between participants' own attitude and the neutral point on the scale (resulting in extremity scores of 1, 2, or 3). These attitude extremity scores were then multiplied by ratings of importance and the product was standardized. Finally, standardized ratings of likelihood to change were subtracted from this product. Higher scores on this index indicate higher levels of issue involvement.

PERCEIVED MOTIVES

Preliminary analyses revealed few effects of attitude topic (abortion vs. gay marriage). Consequently, the results reported below were collapsed across this variable. Perceptions of motive were subjected to an Impression Target (same attitude vs. different) × Issue Involvement (treated as a continuous factor) between-participants analysis of variance. We expected that participants would attribute more negative motives to impression targets with dissimilar (as opposed to similar) attitudes to their own, but we expected this tendency to be magnified among those with high levels of issue involvement. Our forced-choice measure of perceived ethical motivation versus selfishness supported these predictions. Respondents attributed more selfish motivation (and less ethical motivation) to impression targets with dissimilar attitudes (M = 4.13) as compared to similar attitudes (M = 3.50), $F(1, 132) = 3.90$, $p = .05$. Also as predicted, this pattern was magnified among those who were most involved in the issue, as indicated by a significant interaction of impression target and involvement, $F(1, 132) = 5.92$, $p < .05$. The separate measures of perceived selfishness and ethical motivation did not show the overall main effect of impression target, $F < 1$ and $F = 1.1$, *ns*, but they did show the predicted Impression Target × Involvement interaction, Fs$(1, 132) = 8.61$ and 6.67, $p < .01$ and $p = .01$, respectively. As on the forced-choice measure, participants with high involvement tended to perceive more selfishness and less ethical motivation in targets with dissimilar attitudes (compared to those with similar attitudes), whereas these tendencies were absent or reversed among those with low involvement.

Also supporting of our expectations, participants (overall) perceived those with different attitudes as more likely to have a hidden agenda, less likely to have helpful motives, and more likely to be not consciously aware of their own motives (Ms 3.82, 4.26, and 3.90), compared to targets with similar attitudes (Ms = 2.52, 5.06, and 2.89), Fs$(1, 132) = 25.82$, 10.65, and 13.65, ps < .01. In line with our expectations, each of these differences tended to be magnified among participants with high issue involvement (as opposed to low involvement), as revealed by interactions of Impression Target × Involvement, Fs$(1, 132) = 6.51$, 3.50, and 9.21, $p = .01$, $p = .06$, and $p < .01$, respectively.

PERCEPTIONS OF KNOWLEDGE ACQUISITION

Measures of knowledge acquisition were subjected to the same impression target by involvement analysis of variance described above. These measures revealed strong evidence of biased attributions. Specifically, impression targets with dissimilar attitudes were seen as less knowledgeable, less open-minded, and more irrational (Ms = 3.93, 2.96, and 3.92, respectively) than impression targets with similar attitudes (Ms = 4.97, 4.55, and 1.90, respectively), Fs$(1, 132) = 19.86$, 31.67, and 53.78, ps < .01. Measures of perceived knowledge and irrationality also demonstrated significant interactions of impression target with involvement, such that the tendencies described above were stronger among participants with high involvement, compared to those with low involvement, Fs$(1, 132) = 6.24$ and 7.14, $p = .01$ and $p < .01$, respectively.[3]

In sum, the results of Study 4 extended the analysis to two new attitudinal issues (abortion and gay marriage) and investigated two other aspects of naïve realism. First, evidence of egocentric motive attribution was primarily confined to participants who were highly involved in the attitude issue. Second, participants denigrated the knowledge acquisition (extent of knowledge, open-mindedness, and rationality) of those with different attitudes. In addition, on two of our three measures of knowledge acquisition, this latter pattern tended to be magnified among those with high involvement.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

We defined egocentric motive attribution as the tendency to attribute relatively negative motives to others whose attitudinal positions differ from one's own posi-

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tion. To an astute observer of everyday politics, the existence of the phenomenon is hardly surprising. Yet, the magnitude and generality of the bias surpassed our expectations. When judging U.S. President Bush's motives for initiating war in Iraq, both American and Canadian respondents attributed more self-interest and less defensive motivation to the extent that they disagreed with the war (Studies 1 and 2). The findings generalized across both open-ended responses and more structured rating scales. A similar tendency emerged when respondents judged the motives of their fellow citizens who held attitudes about the Iraq war (Study 3), abortion, and gay marriage (Study 4). Moreover, such tendencies were magnified among those most strongly involved in the issue. An air of suspicion pervaded these judgments. Highly involved respondents were wary of hidden motives in the opposition and even tended to doubt that the opposition was aware of its own motives.

The participants in these studies were college students, so caution is in order before generalizing our results to other populations. For example, would these same biases occur among people who are older than 20 years of age? We can conceive of alternative hypotheses regarding this research question. On one hand, we have focused on egocentrism and naïve realism as a determinant of biased attributions (Pronin et al., 2004; Ross & Ward, 1996), and it is possible that late adolescent-age college students are more egocentric than the general population (Sears, 1986). Given that overcoming egocentrism is a lifelong task (Epley et al., 2004), the biases that we have documented in this article may decline with age. On the other hand, our results suggest that biased attributions are a reflection of issue involvement, such that highly involved partisans typically display the most bias. If so, older adults—who tend to be more involved in the political process (Burr, Caro, & Morehead, 2002)—should show the most bias. In fact, the theoretical mechanisms that we have discussed as underlying our findings—naïve realism, social identity concerns, and attitude justification—are likely to be most active under conditions of high ego-involvement. Below, we turn to a discussion of these theoretical influences.

Theoretical Factors Relevant to Egocentric Motive Attribution

We suggest that naïve realism (Ross & Ward, 1996) plays a role in these findings. Adult perceivers never quite shed the egocentric perception that their own view of the world is the correct one (Epley et al., 2004; Inhelder & Piaget, 1958). Robinson et al. (1995) provided strong evidence for the bias as it pertains to knowledge acquisition (e.g., perceptions that others are open-minded). The present research provides additional support for naïve realism, indicating that it affects perceptions of motive (Reeder & Trafimow, in press). Disagreements with others were attributed to others' negative motives, including their self-interest, hidden motives, and lack of awareness of their motivation. For example, those who were opposed to the war viewed President Bush as having selfish, proactive motivations for going to war, including a desire to see the United Statse dominate the world. In contrast, those in favor of the war saw President Bush as unselfishly defending the world from the threat of terrorists.

Miller and his colleagues maintain that there is a strong norm in Western cultures such that perceivers expect the behaviors of others to reflect self-interest (Miller, 1999). In addition, perceivers tend to believe that others are approach-motivated, whereas they often see themselves as avoidance motivated (Miller & Nelson, 2002). These tendencies seem particularly descriptive of war protestors who saw war supporters as having selfish goals such as wanting to control the oil in Iraq. In contrast, war supporters apparently viewed like-minded citizens as motivated by self-defense and avoidance (e.g., wanting to stop terrorism). These findings, therefore, suggest that perceptions of self-interest are not quite as general as Miller (1999) implies. In line with naïve realism, people are quick to take notice of self-interest among those with opposing viewpoints, yet they tend to see like-minded individuals as having more altruistic motives.

In addition to supporting naïve realism, our findings also are consistent with the self-categorization perspective (Turner et al., 1987). Although affiliation with a political party (Republican vs. Democrat) was not a major factor in our results, attitudinal similarity could have provided a stronger basis for drawing group boundaries (Kenworthy & Miller, 2002). Accordingly, our respondents may have viewed those with similar attitudes as the ingroup and viewed those with dissimilar attitudes as the outgroup. Self-categorization theory would predict, therefore, that people would attribute relatively more positive motives to those in the ingroup (Brewer & Brown, 1998; Keen, 1986; Sande, Goethals, Ferrari, & Worth, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Our findings regarding the role of issue involvement also are supportive of this perspective. Self-categorization theory implies that tendencies toward intergroup differentiation will be magnified among those who identify most strongly with their group (Perreault & Bourhis, 1999). If we can assume that people who are highly involved in an attitudinal issue are also most likely to identify with like-minded others, it follows that such people also should show the strongest evidence of intergroup differentiation. Consistent with this line of reasoning, we found that highly involved respondents made more biased

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attributions of motive than did those with lesser involvement.

It appears, then, that our findings concerning egocentric motive attribution are consistent with a variety of theoretical perspectives. In fact, we believe that the robust nature of our findings is due to a confluence of psychological mechanisms. The challenge for future research is to disentangle the effects of these different mechanisms and delineate the conditions under which each holds sway.

NOTES

1. The Alliance and Progressive Conservatives have now merged into the Conservative Party of Canada.

2. To allow participants to respond in an unconstrained manner, the questionnaires in all of our studies began with open-ended questions about the reasons President Bush (or the target group) held their attitude. Due to space limitations, these open-ended responses are not reported in the remaining studies.

3. In general, our analyses indicated similar patterns across the two attitude issues. However, on the measure of helpful motives, participants (in general) perceived more helpful motives on the abortion issue than on the gay marriage issue. Finally, on the measure concerning an open mind, an Impression Target × Attitude Topic interaction emerged, $F(1, 81) = 4.58$, $p < .05$, such that the tendency to perceive targets with dissimilar attitudes as less open-minded occurred mainly on the gay marriage issue (Ms = 2.38 vs. 4.66) as opposed to the abortion issue (Ms = 3.22 vs. 3.65).

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