

Political Orientation, the Correspondence Bias, and Attributions of Wrongdoing
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Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, and Sulloway (2003) maintain that political conservatism stems from motivated social cognition. Specifically, they maintain that conservative political belief, and not liberal political belief, satisfies non-directional psychological motives, such as need for cognitive closure (i.e., a need to reduce ambiguity, to have definitive answers to questions) and existential motivations dealing with low or unstable self-esteem. This motivated cognition explains, among other things, conservatives' tendency to fall prey to the correspondence bias: conservatives desire definitive conclusions as opposed to uncertainty, and automatic dispositional attributions satisfies that desire.

Morgan, Mullen, and Skitka (2010), on the other hand, propose that differences between liberals and conservatives on the correspondence bias are based on values, and provide evidence that both liberals and conservatives demonstrate a dispositional bias when doing so is consistent with their values. The purpose of this study is to examine liberal/conservative assessments of wrongdoing and attributions for causation across different vignettes—a neutral vignette, and vignettes where wrongdoing has been engaged in by someone who would be sympathetic to a liberal in one case (an environmentalist) and a conservative in another (a CIA interrogator). A fourth vignette involved a congressman accused of wrongdoing by his political opponents.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Undergraduate student participants (212 women and 108 men; mean age = 19.27) from two Midwest liberal arts colleges completed the measures in this study for credit in an undergraduate psychology class.

Subjects completed the Mehrabian (1996) conservatism-liberalism scale, responding on a -4 (*very strong disagreement*) to 4 (*very strong agreement*) scale to seven items, such as “I am politically more liberal than conservative” (reverse-scored); “In any election, given a choice between a Republican and a Democratic candidate, I will select the Republican over the Democrat”; and “Socialism has many advantages over capitalism” (reverse-scored). The Cronbach alpha reliability of the scale was acceptable (.81). The scale scores (in original scale units of -4 to +4) ranged from -3.43 on the liberal side of the spectrum to 4.00 on the conservative side, and the scale mean was .27, close to the absolute center of the scale. For the purposes on making categorical analyses, “liberals” in this study were defined as individuals with an average conservatism-liberalism score of less than or equal to -1 on the -4 to +4 scale (n=60), “conservatives” were defined as those with an average score greater than or equal to 1 (n=96), and “moderates” were those between -1 and 1 (n=164).

Subjects also read four vignettes, each presenting a situation in which a person had arguably done something inappropriate:

- 1) a babysitter whose two-year-old charge fell and sprained her arm;
- 2) a CIA agent who used coercive interrogation techniques on a suspected terrorist;
- 3) an environmentalist accused of complicity in a “tree spiking” activity which resulted in injury to a logger; and
- 4) a congressman sponsoring tax breaks for a company that gave him money/employed his wife. (half were told the congressman was a Republican, half were told the congressman was a Democrat).

Following each vignette, participants completed 5 attribution questions. Each subject was asked (on a 1-7 scale) the extent to which:

- 1) the individual's behavior was a function of the expectations and demands of his/her job;
- 2) the individual's behavior was a function of the kind of person she/he was;
- 3) the individual's behavior was an inevitable consequence of the situation;
- 4) the individual's behavior was a function of his/her own choices and decisions; and
- 5) they blamed the person for any wrongdoing.

Results

A 3 (political orientation: liberal/moderate/conservative) x 4 (vignette) x 2 (political party of congressman: Republican/Democrat) between-within repeated measures ANOVA was performed on each of the 5 attribution items. There were no main effects of political orientation for any of the attribution items (all p 's > .10)—conservatives, moderates, and liberals did not significantly differ in assigning wrongdoing, nor in making external or internal attributions for behavior.

There were two significant two-way interactions with political orientation—one with attributions of wrongdoing and one with attributions about the kind of people the targets were. First, there was a 3 (political orientation: lib/mod/con) x 4 (vignette) interaction with attributions of wrongdoing ($F(6, 942) = 4.91, p < .001$). Simple effects analysis revealed that conservatives assigned more wrongdoing to the environmentalist (4.4) than to the CIA agent (3.6), while liberals placed more wrong-doing on the CIA agent (4.5) than on the environmentalist (3.8). Political moderates did not differ in the wrongdoing they assigned to the environmentalist (4.2) and the CIA agent (4.2). (see Figure 1).

Second, there was a 3 (political orientation: lib/mod/con) x 4 (vignette) interaction with attributions about the kind of people the targets were ($F(6, 942) = 4.91, p < .001$). As Figure 2 shows, the nature of the interaction did not involve differences in ratings of the CIA agent and the environmentalist—simple effects analysis revealed that liberals, moderates, and conservatives all rated the environmentalist's behavior as being more a function of the kind of person he was than the CIA agent's behavior being a function of the kind of person he was. Simple effects analysis did reveal that conservatives made a greater person attribution for the babysitter (5.1) than for the CIA agent (3.8), while liberals made a greater person attribution for the environmentalist (5.6) than for the babysitter (4.9).

There was also a significant 3 (political orientation: lib/mod/con) x 2 (congressman's political party: Republican vs Democrat) x 4 (vignette) interaction with attribution about the extent to which behavior is a function of the situation the targets were in ($F(6, 942) = 3.09, p = .005$). Simple effects follow-ups found that political moderates said the situation caused the behavior of the CIA agent (4.1) and environmentalist (3.7) more so than it did for the Republican congressman (3.2).

More relevant to the current study, however, conservatives said the behavior of the CIA agent was more a function of the situation (4.6) than was the behavior of the Democratic congressman (3.3), while liberals attributed the behavior of the environmentalist more to the situation (4.1) than they attributed the Republican congressman's behavior to the situation (3.2), though this latter effect only approached traditional levels of significance ($p < .10$).

Discussion

The result of this study suggest answers to two broad questions. The first question is whether political conservatives are more likely to fall prey to the correspondence bias than are political liberals and moderates. If, as Jost et al (2003) contend, political conservatism satisfies certain psychological needs for those who hold those views, such as a desire for cognitive closure, conservatives would be expected to utilize dispositional as opposed to situational attributions to a greater extent than would those with other political orientations. Our data do not support that contention: there were no overall differences among liberals, moderates, and conservatives on any of the attribution items.

The second question these data address is whether conservatives differ from liberals in their willingness to make dispositional attributions for individuals with whom they might be expected to disagree, and situational (and perhaps exculpatory) attributions for individuals with whom they might be expected to be more sympathetic. There was also no evidence in support of this contention. First, there were no political orientation interactions with type of target (babysitter, CIA agent, environmentalist, congressman) for three of the attribution items (behavior as a function of 1) type of person, 2) demands of job, and 3) the targets' choices and decisions).

For attributions regarding the situation, conservatives and liberals made similar motivated attributions: conservatives said the situation was more important for the CIA agent than for a Democratic congressman, while liberals said the situation was more important for the environmentalist than for the Republican congressman.

Finally, while conservatives attributed more wrongdoing to the environmentalist than they did to the CIA agent, liberals attributed more wrongdoing to the CIA agent than to the environmentalist—and political moderates did not differ in the wrong-doing they assigned to these two actors.

Caution must of course be exercised about generalizing these results based on a sample of college students to the wider American population—college-aged liberals and conservatives are not necessarily the same as older (or differently-educated) liberals and conservatives. Nonetheless, Jost et al (2003) contend that a major distinction between liberals and conservatives is that conservatives adopt their political orientation as a means of satisfying certain psychological motives, so one would expect motivational differences to exist between conservatives and liberals across situations and the lifespan. Our data find no evidence of overall differences in attributions among liberals, conservatives, and moderates. With respect to the motivation to arrive at particular attributions for individuals with whom they agree or disagree, liberals and conservatives either do not differ, or differ in ways that suggest a similar pattern of motivated reasoning. These data are thus supportive of Morgan et al.'s (2010) contention that to the extent they do display the correspondence bias, liberals and conservatives are both likely to be biased in favor of positions consistent with their values.

References

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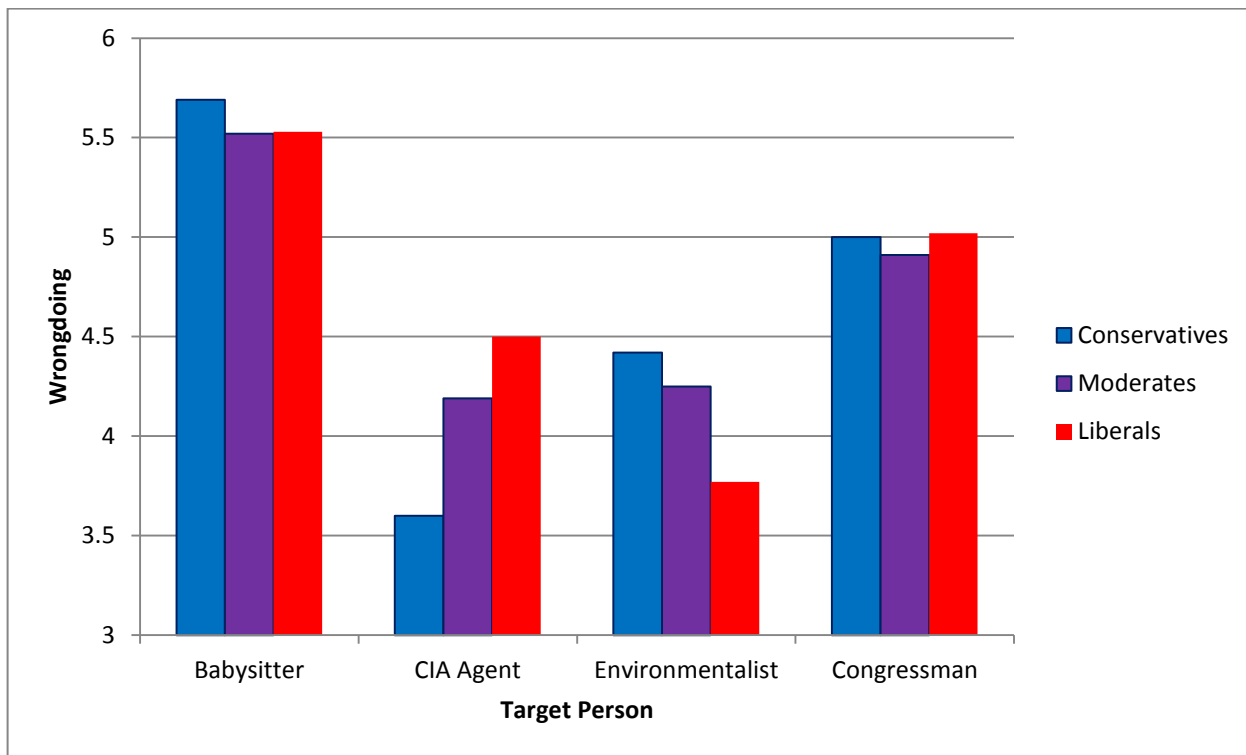


Figure 1. Attributions of wrongdoing made by liberals, moderates, and conservatives for behaviors committed by target individuals in each of the four vignettes.

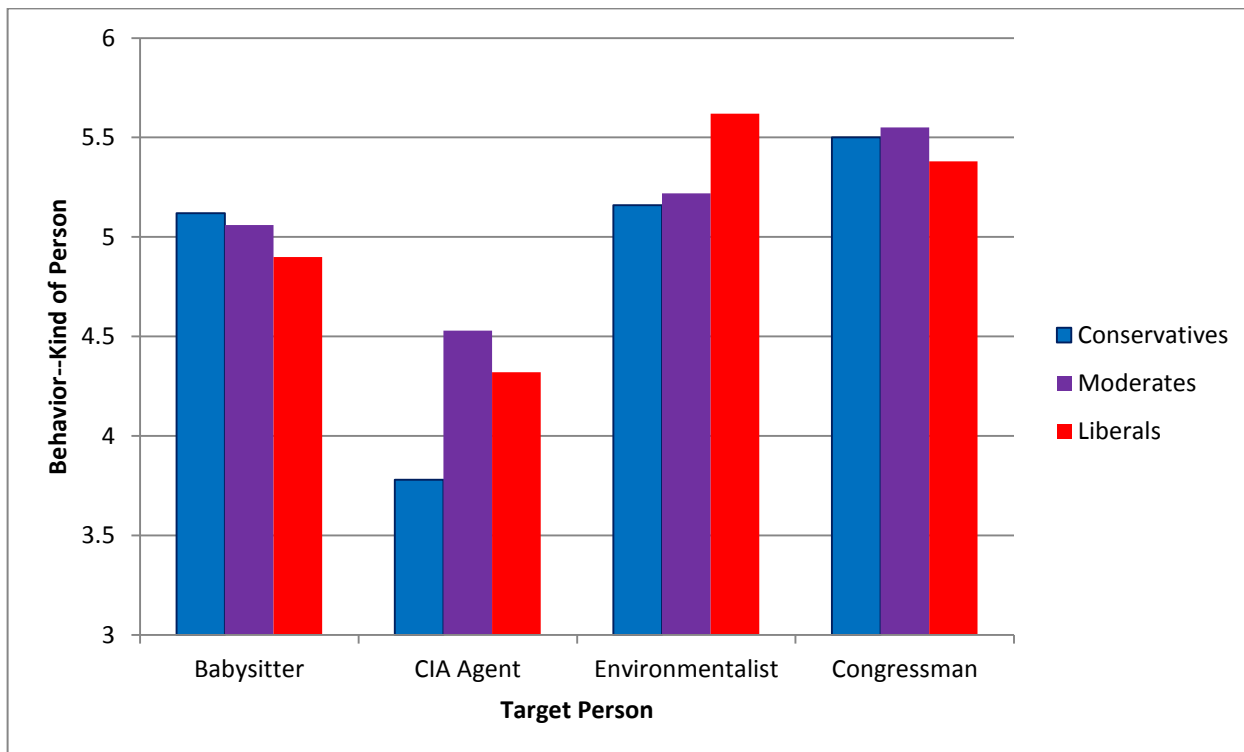


Figure 2. Attributions made by liberals, moderates, and conservatives for behaviors committed by target individuals in each of the four vignettes is a function of the kind of person they are.