



The source attribution effect: Demonstrating pernicious disagreement between ideological groups on non-divisive aphorisms



Paul H.P. Hanel^{a,b,c,*}, Uwe Wolfradt^c, Gregory R. Maio^{a,b}, Antony S.R. Manstead^b

^a Department of Psychology, University of Bath, Bath, United Kingdom

^b School of Psychology, Cardiff University, United Kingdom

^c Institut für Psychologie, Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, Germany

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ABSTRACT

We tested whether mere source attribution is sufficient to cause polarization between groups, even on consensual non-divisive positions. Across four studies ($N = 2182$), using samples from Germany, the UK, and the USA, agreement with aphorisms was high in the *absence* of source attribution. In contrast, atheists agreed less with brief aphorisms when they were presented as Bible verses (Studies 1 and 2), whereas Christians agreed more (Study 2). Democrats and Republicans (USA) and Labour supporters and Conservative supporters (UK) agreed more with politically non-divisive aphorisms that were presented as originating from a politician belonging to their own party (e.g., Clinton, Trump, Corbyn) than with the same aphorisms when they were presented as originating from a politician belonging to the rival party (Studies 3 and 4). This source attribution effect was not moderated by education, amount of thinking about the aphorisms, identification with the ingroup, trust, dissonance, fear of reproach, or attitude strength. We conclude that source attribution fundamentally interferes with epistemic progress in debate because of the way in which attributions of statements to sources powerfully affects reasoning about their arguments.

1. Introduction

In the present research, we examine whether agreement on uncontroversial, non-partisan issues is reduced by the simple knowledge that they are endorsed by “the other side”. There are increasingly distrustful and entrenched divisions between religious and political ideological groups. For example, in the USA, differences in religious ideology are manifested in the lower trust felt toward atheists than other religious groups (e.g., Muslims; Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006). In 2014, atheists and Christians, especially Evangelical Christians, rated each other as the coldest group on a feeling thermometer (Lipka, 2014). There are also remarkable differences in political ideology. Only 9% of US-American married couples consist of Democrat-Republican pairs (Rosenfeld, Reuben, & Maja Falcon, 2015), and the degree of political attitude concordance between spouses exceeds the concordance in personality and physical traits (Alford, Hatemi, Hibbing, Martin, & Eaves, 2011).

The degree of discord between political ideological groups has increased in recent decades (Iyengar & Krupenkin, 2018). For example, in 1960, 33% of Democrats and Republicans viewed their own party members as intelligent and 27% considered the opposing party

members as intelligent (averaged across both groups). By 2008, this gap had widened to 62% versus 14%, respectively (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012). Similarly, the proportion of party members who would be somewhat or very unhappy if their children were to marry someone who supports the other party was ten times larger in 2010 than in 1960 (Iyengar et al., 2012). Moreover, the degree of discord is often stronger among more highly educated supporters of both parties, especially on issues related to environmental protection or moral issues, such as abortion and homosexuality (Pew Research Center, 2016). A range of studies suggest that conservatives and liberals are equally biased against each other (Ditto et al., 2017; Frimer, Skitka, & Motyl, 2017), and these divisions are so well-known that it is no longer surprising to see disagreement between these ideological groups on divisive contemporary issues.

However, a fundamental question is whether this disagreement even applies when the opposing group makes *non-divisive* claims to holding the same core values, eliciting disagreement where there should be agreement. If so, this effect would be evidence that mere source attribution is, by itself, a powerful barrier to resolving existing ideological and political differences. This issue is important because shared values are often seen as a bridge that can help to forge agreement. For

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of Bath, Claverton Down, BA2 7AY Bath, United Kingdom.
E-mail address: p.hanel@bath.ac.uk (P.H.P. Hanel).

instance, after the attacks on 11.09.2001, the United Nations Secretary General (New York, Sept. 24) argued for the importance of finding “a framework of *shared values and understanding*...” Yet, it could be argued that opposing ideological groups already attempt to reach out through statements affirming shared values, but these pledges fail to elicit shared understanding because people know *who* makes the statements. This potential effect of source attributions on agreement with the same aphorisms is the focus of the present research. Here, we provide the first direct examination of whether source knowledge prevents affirmations of shared values from bridging ideological divisions, focusing on several polarized ideological groups: atheists, Christians, US-Democrats, US-Republicans, supporters of the UK-Conservative and UK-Labour party. Further, we investigate a range of previously unexplored moderators to get a better understanding of the underlying mechanisms of the source attribution effect.

1.1. Group identity and persuasion

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) provide a useful theoretical framework to understand disagreement between ideological groups. These theories suggest that ideological divisions between groups are likely to be inflated when group identity is salient. Social identity theory postulates that membership of social groups provides an important basis for social identity and that people are therefore motivated to find ways of distinguishing their own group from the outgroup in ways that reflect well on the ingroup.

The relevance of source attribution to intergroup agreement is illustrated in a study that asked 1000 Jewish pupils to judge whether they agreed with the action of the main character of a short story (Tamarin, 1966). In one condition, pupils were presented with a short passage from the Old Testament book of Joshua. Joshua, a Jewish leader, is accurately described as conquering a city and slaughtering everyone inside it, including children and animals. Sixty percent of the pupils endorsed Joshua's actions. However, when the same passage was said to describe the actions of General Lin in China 3000 years ago, just 7% of the pupils endorsed General Lin's actions. Similarly, Jews and Palestinians agreed less with a peace plan for the Israel-Palestinian conflict when it was attributed to the “other side” (Maoz, Ward, Katz, & Ross, 2002).

A possible mechanism underlying these effects are that ingroup members see each other as similar, and as more different from outgroup members, in accordance with self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987). This greater perceived similarity influences trustworthiness and persuasion (Faraji-Rad, Samuelsen, & Warlop, 2015). A related explanation was proposed by Asch (1948): Based on the findings of Lorge and Curtiss (1936), Asch argued that the perceived prestige of authors plays a role in how statements are assessed. This hypothesis was supported by more recent studies of the perceived prestige of leaders, which was operationalized as the leader's charisma: Leaders described with in-group characteristics were evaluated as more charismatic and authentic (Platow, van Knippenberg, Haslam, van Knippenberg, & Spears, 2006; Steffens, Mols, Haslam, & Okimoto, 2016; see also Mols, 2012). At the same time, people may inherently distrust the outgroup sources more (e.g., Yuki, Maddux, Brewer, & Takemura, 2005). Thus, the influence of someone from the ingroup is likely to be higher because ingroup members are perceived as more trustworthy.

This ingroup bias extends to the processing of persuasive messages: Information from ingroup members is more persuasive (Mackie, Gastardo-Conaco, & Skelly, 1992; Mackie, Worth, & Asuncion, 1990; McGarty, Haslam, Hutchinson, & Turner, 1994). For example, drawing on Turner's (1982, 1985) work, Mackie et al. (1990) reasoned that an argument from the ingroup is persuasive “for the very reason that it is seen as reflecting, defining, and informing about social reality for people similar to the recipient” (p. 813). To test this assumption, Mackie et al. asked psychology undergraduate students to read a

message advocating abolition of the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) exams. Participants were either informed that the message came from an ingroup member (a delegate from their own university) or an outgroup (another university). The message arguments were pretested to be either weak or strong. Participants were more persuaded when the content was strong as opposed to weak, but only when the message was said to come from an ingroup member. When the message was said to come from an outgroup member, participants were equally unpersuaded by strong and weak messages, showing that the effect of argument strength is moderated by source attribution.

However, people are blind to this influence (Cohen, 2003), and this effect occurs only when group membership is considered to be relevant for the attitude issue (Wyer, 2010). Drawing on self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987) and the work of Mackie et al. (1992, 1990), Wyer (2010) manipulated whether the attitude issue was relevant to group membership. For example, in Study 1, conducted in the USA, Wyer presented members of the Democratic and Republican parties with arguments on issues that were either relevant to their party affiliation (legalization of euthanasia) or irrelevant (increasing credit requirements for undergraduate students). The arguments were presented as originating either from the ingroup or from the outgroup, and as either in favor or opposing the attitude issue. When the topic was relevant to the source (euthanasia), the origin had a strong effect: When the arguments were pro-euthanasia, participants supported euthanasia more when the arguments came from an ingroup than outgroup member. Similarly, when the arguments were against euthanasia, participants opposed euthanasia more when arguments came from an ingroup than outgroup member. Importantly, when the topic was irrelevant to the source (credit requirements), the effects were weaker or non-existent.

What remains unclear is whether value-laden aphorisms would be judged in a similar way to the relevant or irrelevant arguments used by Wyer (2010). This is important because much of the most striking content of political speeches consists of truistic, value laden assertions rather than arguments. Examples are the political slogans used during the most recent election campaigns of the US-American presidential candidate Hillary Clinton (“Stronger together”; in 2016), the British Prime Minister Theresa May (“Strong and stable leadership”; 2017), or the German Chancellor Angela Merkel (“For a Germany where we live well and happy”; 2017). None of these slogans contains any substantive argument. The endpoints of the slogans are uncontroversial truisms: Most if not all parties would share the aims of Americans being “stronger together”, providing the UK with “strong and stable leadership”, or enabling German citizens to “live well and happy”. Nevertheless, the arguments are linked to different politicians or political parties, and the implications of attaching the same aphoristic statements to opposing parties have not been examined. We expect that even aphorisms or truisms can be subject to strong ingroup biases, effectively negating their ability to bridge divisions between groups.

Overall, then, the effects of source attribution on persuasiveness have been shown in a variety of ways in relation to controversial topics (e.g., military aggression, potentially complex peace settlements between opposing sides) with polarizing content (e.g., Cohen, 2003; Mackie et al., 1990; Maoz et al., 2002) or criticisms of the ingroup (e.g., Hornsey & Esposo, 2009). Effects such as these do not always replicate across context, sample type, and time (e.g., Hanel & Vione, 2016; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010), and it is important to identify boundary conditions. Here, we probe whether the effect of group membership is so powerful that it even affects the endorsement of non-divisive aphorisms that reflect shared values. Specifically, we investigate whether source attributions affect responses even to statements that could be bridges for rapprochement between ideological groups: uncontroversial aphorisms that are endorsed in both groups.

Researching this issue is important for theoretical and practical reasons. From a theoretical perspective, evidence of a source attribution effect on the extent of agreement with consensual aphorisms would

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