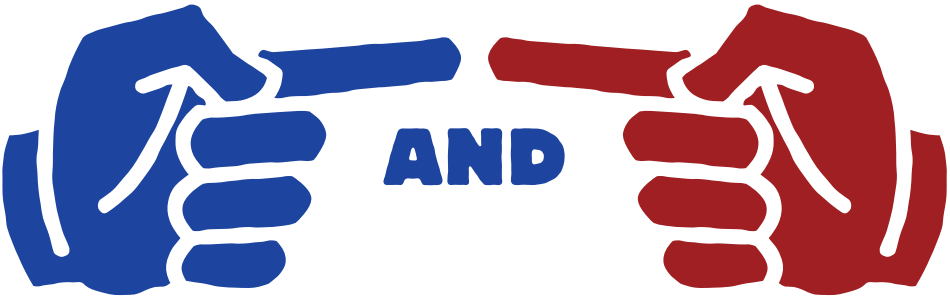
BLAME AND POLITICAL ATTITUDES



THE PSYCHOLOGY OF AMERICA'S CULTURE WAR

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Blame and Political Attitudes

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The Psychology of America's Culture War

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To Lily and Jean-Luc

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Blame: A Social-Psychological Perspective

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of blame in American society. It seems to be a national obsession.

Who was to blame for the 2007 economic crisis? In a *Time* magazine special issue, one could read a list of the 25 most "blameworthy" individuals, including politicians such as former presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton as well as figures in the world of finance such as former chairman of the Federal Reserve Alan Greenspan and now-famous swindler Bernie Madoff. You could even vote in a poll entitled "Who deserves the most blame?"[1]

Who was to blame for the September 11 attacks on the US? President George W. Bush initially suggested "evil" was responsible.[2] Religious leader Jerry Falwell was more specific, stating that feminists, Pro-Choice supporters, gays and lesbians and the ACLU each bore some responsibility.[3] And a few individuals, such as writer Susan Sontag, took the position that Americans themselves were partially to blame, for which she was roundly vilified.[4]

Who is to blame for the latest spate of mass shootings? The NRA and other gun rights advocates suggest that the mental health system is responsible for not identifying "at risk" individuals; hence the slogan

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"Guns don't kill people. People do." Those in favor of gun control believe that gun availability is the major cause and thus that politicians unwilling to enact tougher gun laws are responsible.

Placing blame is a powerful political tool, but its power is not limited to politics. We frequently assign responsibility for the causes of events in our everyday lives, from blaming a spouse for being late to blaming a fellow driver for a car accident to holding a surgeon responsible for a patient's death. One need not comb through one's memory for long to come up with many examples, some trivial and others more consequential.

In this book, I will discuss why we seem to be constantly searching for causes of events, why we look for someone to blame for the negative ones, and what the effects are of the decisions we make about causes and blame. I hope to illuminate the importance of blame in everyday life, especially political life, considering the way blame affects our responses to a number of different political issues and how it fits into the bigger picture of our worldview. I will also try to convince you that, in spite of what you've heard about America's culture war, citizens do not think as differently about most issues as you might imagine. But before we get into politics, let's consider the blame process on a more personal level.

The Search for a Cause

Imagine that you learn that some public figure, maybe an actor or a news anchorperson, has been diagnosed with lung cancer. What is the first thought to come to your mind? If you are like most people, you will very quickly ask: "Was he a smoker?" This question will not be the only one to occur to you. Perhaps you will also wonder about the individual's age and whether he had a spouse or children. But evidence suggests that most of us want to know WHY. And though we may feel badly for this person's fate no matter what the cause of the illness, we will feel especially sympathetic if the answer to the question is, "No, he didn't smoke, and in fact, he took very good care of himself."

To understand this reaction, let's first look in more detail at the anatomy of causality. Attribution theorists have for decades been studying

the ways in which we attribute causes for events. Early on, it was pointed out that the causes we might come up with differ according to a few different dimensions. First, the cause we identify might lie within the person (an internal cause) or outside the person (an external cause).[5] So, for example, smoking or an inherited genetic predisposition to cancer would be internal causes, whereas pollution in the air or bad luck would be classified as external causes. But it is apparent that we must distinguish further among these causes. Both smoking and a genetic predisposition are internal, and yet, we would respond rather differently to these two causes. How are they different? The dimension that distinguishes between them is an important one: controllability.[6] Smoking is not only internal to the person but also controllable by him. That is, he could have chosen to do otherwise, in this case, not to smoke. One cannot control one's genetic predispositions; therefore, we are not held responsible for them. It turns out that this distinction between causes that are controllable by the person and those that are not is important. The nonsmoker, who got cancer through no fault of his own is not blamed, and in fact we feel sympathy for him. The smoker who is seen as responsible for the cause of his cancer will not receive as much sympathy, and he may even elicit some anger. Further, not only are our emotions affected by these conclusions regarding the cause of an illness, but even our behavior is influenced.

In a critical study, prominent attribution researcher Bernard Weiner and two colleagues examined how responses to a number of different illnesses or stigmas were influenced by the degree to which the cause was under the control of the stigmatized person. Their findings revealed that we respond very differently to a person who is blamed for his or her illness than to the one who is not held responsible.[7] Thus, we feel sorry for the person who has heart disease due to hereditary factors but not so much for the one who eats fattening food and doesn't exercise. This seems common sense, even obvious. But what if we are wrong about how much control the individual has? We don't have a lot of sympathy for the alcoholic or the drug addict because no matter how hard experts try to convince us that these disorders are uncontrollable illnesses, we still hold the individual responsible. We are so convinced that the addict could control his or her habit that the medical approach to addiction has never really

taken hold in the general public. And the sympathy or lack thereof that we experience is translated into very real monetary terms: we don't want to give money to help those who are blamed for their situation. Weiner and his colleagues discovered that the individuals they surveyed reported being much more likely to make charitable donations to help those with illnesses or stigmas that were uncontrollable in origin than those perceived as controllable. We contribute to curing Alzheimer's but not obesity even if obesity is killing many more people.

Particularly illustrative of this tendency are those illnesses that have gone through a metamorphosis in terms of their perceived causal controllability. For example, when HIV/AIDS was first coming to the attention of the public, it was perceived as "the gay disease" presumably contracted through promiscuous and/or homosexual contact and later through intravenous drug use. Neither of these causes would have been perceived to be uncontrollable by the infected individual at that time, and most Americans were not particularly concerned about helping those suffering with the disorder. With time, as the public became more aware of uncontrollable causes (blood transfusions, being born to a HIV-positive mother), sympathy began to increase, and so did support for finding a cure.[8]

Weiner and his colleagues thus suggest that a particular sequence is initiated when we embark on a causal search in response to a negative event or stigma:

1. What is the cause?
2. Is this cause internal to the person or external? Is it controllable? If the cause is internal/controllable, we hold the person responsible, that is, we blame him or her. If the cause is external and/or uncontrollable, we do not hold the person responsible and do not blame him or her.
3. Emotional reactions follow from this, such that we feel little sympathy and maybe even some anger toward the blamed individual. Conversely, we feel a great deal of sympathy and no anger toward the person who is not blamed.
4. Finally, these emotions are acted upon such that we do not wish to help the person with whom we are angry and may in fact wish to punish them, but we do wish to help the one for whom we feel sympathy or pity.

Fig. 1.1 Basic attributional model linking perceived cause with blame, emotion, and behavior

Weiner's model has now been applied in many contexts, and it has been found to hold so well that he suggests it to be a universal truth.[9] Though there may be minor variations in the way individuals perceive causality, the causal perception-blame-emotion-action sequence shown in Fig. 1.1 above has proven to be remarkably generalizable.

It is important to note that research varies in measuring the concepts of perceived controllability, responsibility, and blame, with some studies assessing all three and some only using ratings of one or two of them. When all three measures are included, they are often combined into one rating. Though there are theoretical distinctions between the three concepts, they tend to be highly related. I have chosen to primarily use "blame" in this book to represent any combination of these measures in the interest of simplicity.[10]

The importance of responsibility in judging others was suggested much earlier by Aristotle, who distinguished between voluntary and involuntary actions:

> Since virtue is concerned with passions and actions, and on voluntary passions and actions praise and blame are bestowed, on those that are involuntary, pardon, and sometimes also pity, to distinguish the voluntary and the involuntary is presumably necessary for those who are studying the nature of virtue, and useful also for legislators with a view to the assigning both of honors and of punishments.[11]

As Aristotle implies, we may initiate causal searches in the case of positive events (those deserving of praise rather than blame) as well. So, if we succeed at a task, we might ask why. However, evidence suggests that we are more likely to search for causes of negative events than positive ones, and we are more likely to do so if the event is surprising or unexpected than

if it is mundane or expected.[12] Thus, we'll be more likely to ask why questions when we don't get that promotion at work than we will if we do get it. Perhaps it is obvious to us that we are smart and work hard so it is not necessary to ask questions in the event of a success! In addition, we'll be more likely to ask why a person suddenly jumps onto a chair and begins singing loudly in a restaurant than we will to ask why he engages in polite conversation like everyone else. That which is usual does not need to be explained.

This Is Common Sense!

I have been discussing the role of blame in society in my social psychology and political psychology courses for over 25 years. My students typically have had one of two reactions to the material you are about to read: (1) "Wow, that's so true! Why didn't I think it about it that way?" and (2) "Well, yes, no wonder it works, it's common sense!" Some of the ideas I present are indeed so ingrained in our behavior that they are, in a way, common sense.

I like to teach through demonstration, so I ask students to answer the very questions that were posed in many of the research studies we will discuss in the pages that follow. We discuss questions of blame, consider emotional reactions of sympathy and anger, and then whether they would help. For example, they consider whether they'd be more likely to lend their notes to a fellow student who missed class because of an illness or one who skipped class to go to the beach. They are not surprised at all that we feel sympathy and no anger for someone who is not to blame and want to help her, whereas when we perceive someone as blameworthy, we feel little sympathy, perhaps some anger, and tend not to offer help.

I ask them: "If you wanted to get an extension for a paper or take an exam later, what sorts of reasons would you give a professor that would be most likely to get her to agree?" They instantly can come up with causes for being unprepared that were not under their control, such as "I was sick" and "my uncle died," that will likely lead the professor to want to help. They can also identify causes that would make her less

sympathetic, such as "I just didn't feel like studying" or "I wanted to go to a party that night." They may not have the psychological language to identify what is going on in these situations, but they intuitively understand how blame affects our reactions to others and their reactions to us. Thus, the role of blame in everyday life is common sense indeed. However, when applied to more important issues, the same analysis reveals mechanisms of which we are unaware that have far-reaching consequences.

The Social World as a Courtroom

Research in social psychology suggests that a fairly automatic and partially unconscious process takes place each time we respond to a particular issue, say abortion or gay rights, and that this process is not all that different from the one that is triggered by the student who missed class. That the same sequence of thoughts and emotions determines our response to a student in need of help as to, for example, a woman seeking an abortion, underlines the importance of understanding the process. We may not place blame any differently, but at least we will know why we respond the way we do and why people in the other camp (such as Democrats if you are a Republican or conservatives if you are a liberal) appear to respond in the opposite way.

We don't necessarily start with the intention of blaming someone. In fact, the process is triggered in part by a need to understand others. Fritz Heider, one of the first social psychologists to focus on the way we think about the social world, suggested that in a sense human beings are all amateur psychologists. His theory of "naïve psychology" holds that people have a need to understand and predict events. It is clearly adaptive to do so.[13] If I don't understand why something happened, I cannot predict when it will happen again, nor can I avoid repeating the same negative occurrence. Thus, it makes sense for us to try to understand the causes of events that happen to ourselves and others. Just as children learn that certain actions (touching something hot or bumping into a table) cause physical pain, we must also learn that other actions will result in psychological pain, such as failing at some task or making a friend or family

member angry. If we do not understand why we failed or why the person got angry, we cannot avoid failing or angering others in the future. Thus, we invest considerable energy in trying to understand the causes of events, particularly negative ones.

This model of humans as rational beings who seek to understand the social world fits with a metaphor of people as scientists that characterized social-psychological theories of the 1960s and 1970s.[14] These researchers suggested that, like scientists, laypeople gather data and make rational decisions based on the facts. The search for causes was seen as a part of this process. However, as will be considered in more depth later, recent research suggests that individuals do not behave entirely as objective scientists. Like scientists, people do collect data; however, they also seem to have a need to evaluate or judge others (which a scientist should not do). What metaphor would capture both the need to collect data and the need to evaluate or blame others? The metaphor endorsed by current theorists suggests that human beings act as judges, and thus the social world is a sort of courtroom.[15] We proceed through our day observing others and making judgments about why they behaved in a particular way or why they are in a given situation. Based on those judgments, we determine guilt or innocence and finally mete out punishment or reward.

Let's consider an example: two people, Juanita and Hakeem, both encounter a homeless person on the street. What is the process that ensues? Perhaps they notice, with some discomfort, the person's ragged and dirty clothing. They may try to avoid eye contact in hopes of avoiding a direct request for help. Their initial emotions then are probably mildly negative. What happens next? It is likely that their responses will be in part determined by how they perceive the cause of homelessness. Juanita believes it results from laziness or drug abuse, blames the individual, experiences little sympathy and maybe even some anger. She probably will not offer help. Hakeem, on the other hand, believes that homelessness is largely a societal problem resulting from things like poor economic conditions and a lack of jobs. His response will be quite different. He does not blame the person for his plight and therefore is likely to feel sympathy, and he may even dig out some change. Thus, whether we see the homeless man as responsible for the cause of his situation determines whether we will blame him, which then influences our emotional

reactions and behavior. Like a judge in a courtroom, we must determine whether the person is innocent, having become homeless through no fault of his own, or a guilty man who is suffering a deserved fate. We then respond according to our judgment.

Of course, we do not all come to the same conclusions about the cause of the individual's situation, and that is one of the most interesting aspects of this process. The judgments we make may not be consistent with those of other judges, but they are consistent with our individual worldview or ideology, not to mention the system of cultural beliefs in which we are steeped. Bountiful literature in social psychology suggests that people have a strong preference for consistency, so we are unlikely to attribute causes in a way that challenges our existing views.[16] This preference for consistency is but one of a number of tendencies that influence our judgments. These tendencies or biases in the way we blame will also be discussed in this book.

Specifically, in regard to the example of the homeless person, why might people from an individualistic culture like the US be more likely to attribute his homelessness to laziness or some other personal failing than those from a more collectivistic one, like India or Japan? Why is the tendency to hold the homeless man responsible even more pronounced for those who place themselves at the conservative end of the political spectrum? A series of fascinating studies has addressed questions like these and further illuminated the blame process. And interestingly, although there is a good deal of evidence that conservatives and liberals ultimately place blame somewhat differently, their initial reactions to many issues are actually surprisingly similar. Specifically, both tend to start by blaming the individual. Evidence suggests that after that initial judgment, they may shift the blame when doing so would be more consistent with their overall belief systems.[17]

Why Blame?

Why do we so often blame the individual? There are a number of theories that can be brought to bear on this question. Some of these theories take what psychologists refer to as a **cognitive perspective**, which focuses on

the way we process information. From this standpoint, our judgments of others depend on the sort of information that is available to us. Thus, we might blame someone because we mainly have information that supports that judgment. In the case of the homeless person, we might blame him because we are only confronted with information about him and not about other possible causes (such as, whether he was laid off by his employer). This view holds that human beings are relatively objective and dispassionate processors of information, not necessarily motivated to come to one conclusion or another. That is, we are like the unbiased and fair judge in the courtroom who simply wants the truth, though she may not have all possible information relevant to the case.

An alternative is the **motivational perspective**, which, holds that individuals make judgments largely based on their own personal needs and desires. Thus, we might blame the homeless man because otherwise we feel terribly saddened by his state. It is much more psychologically comfortable to believe that a suffering person did something to deserve his misery. That is, we are judging others in part based on our own self-interested goals. In this case, we are more like the biased judge in the courtroom who wants a conviction because it would look good on her record!

In truth, there is value in both of these perspectives. The current thinking in the field of "social cognition," the study of how we process social information, is that people are neither totally rational nor totally irrational. Herbert Simon, one of the most important figures in this domain suggested a model of "bounded rationality" which holds that people are rational in that they have reasons for their actions, but that they do not actually make decisions free of personal biases or interests like a computer would.[18] In this book, both the more and less rational aspects of the process of judging others will be considered.

Of course, sometimes we have fairly clear evidence that one or another cause is responsible for an event. So, for example, we may know that a friend is sad because she just lost a family member. But many other times, we do not know the exact cause of something, and we may in fact have precious little information to guide us. However, that does not stop us from coming to causal conclusions. Life is complex, and we are often faced with multiple possible causes of events from which we must choose

the most important one. The crucial point is that we select particular causes and create a narrative of the situation that suits our beliefs and needs. And it is in such cases, when the cause of the situation is not known, that biases or tendencies to draw certain conclusions become important.

Biases in Causal Attribution

One of the earliest biases to be identified is so elemental a tendency in human judgment that it was labeled the **Fundamental Attribution Error**. It describes the propensity for an individual to attribute the behavior of others to their dispositions or traits rather than to the situational they are in. Thus, if we see someone trip and fall while walking down the street, we are more likely to assume that the person is clumsy than that the sidewalk is uneven. Or if a teacher delivers a bad lecture on the first day of class, students are more likely to suppose that she is a lousy lecturer than that she had a car accident on the way to school. That is, we are quick to come to the conclusion that an action tells us something about the person, such as what type of person they are.

Though many researchers have studied this phenomenon, the original experiment is still worth describing. In 1967, Ed Jones and Victor Harris published a paper documenting a finding that had surprised them.[19] Imagine yourself as a participant in this study. After a brief introduction, you are asked to listen to a speech that is sympathetic to (in favor of) the notorious Communist leader of Cuba, Fidel Castro. Other participants listen to a speech that is unsympathetic (opposed) to Castro. You are then told that the writer of the speech had chosen the position taken in it (either pro- or anti-Castro). Though you do not know it, other participants in the study are told that the position was determined randomly. Specifically, they are told that whether the writer was told to take a position in favor of or against Castro was determined by a coin toss. You and the other participants are then asked to rate how favorable you believe the speech writers actually were toward Castro.

What would you predict about the behavior of the people who, like you, were told that the speaker chose his position? The experimenters

predicted that when a position is freely chosen, it indicates something about the person. Thus, if a speechwriter chose to write a pro-Castro speech, he is probably pro-Castro. The results of the experiment supported this prediction—participants believed that the person who chose to write a pro-Castro speech was more pro-Castro than the person who chose to write an anti-Castro speech.

What about when the position taken in the speech was not chosen but randomly assigned? The researchers predicted that participants would assume that an assigned position does not tell us much about how the person actually feels. If one is instructed by an authority figure to write a pro-Castro essay, why would it indicate anything about his real opinion? To their surprise, Jones and Harris found that even when the participants were told that the writer's position was determined randomly, they STILL perceived the writers of the pro-Castro essays as more favorable toward Castro than the writers of the anti-Castro essays. It was as if subjects were unable to take the situation (of being forced to take a particular political position) into account in their judgments. Many studies conducted in the 50-plus years since this classic experiment have demonstrated similar findings. We cling to the idea that someone's action always tells us something about her character or beliefs, even if she did not choose to perform that action but rather was compelled to do so.

Interestingly, we usually do not have this problem when we are thinking about the causes of our own behavior. In that case, we are easily able to see the influence of the situation. We look down with outrage at the unevenness in the sidewalk that CAUSED us to lose our footing, but we smirk at the other person who trips because he is such a klutz! This discrepancy also has a name: the **Actor-Observer Bias**.[20]

Why are we so likely to attribute the other person's action to his traits or character? There are a few possible explanations for this inclination, some of which fall into the cognitive approach mentioned earlier, whereas others fit with the motivational approach. The most popular cognitive explanation is quite simple: when we are observing a person in a given situation, the person is very salient; that is to say, he stands out. There is some evidence that we are more likely to identify something or someone as a causal factor if that entity is perceptually salient to us. In the example of the person walking down the street, the person is more likely to catch

our attention than is the condition of the sidewalk if we are the observer. (The opposite is true if we are the person walking on the uneven sidewalk, which we see quite clearly—we do not see ourselves.) This explanation, focusing as it does on the type of information we attend to and process, is consistent with the cognitive approach. There is no particular need being satisfied by the way we attribute causality; we are simply paying attention to specific information.

An alternative view is that we are motivated to make personal attributions to maintain a belief that the world is a just, orderly place in which good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. The **Just World Theory** suggests that we blame people for the bad things that happen to them to protect ourselves from facing the harsh reality that horrible fates sometimes befall people who did nothing to deserve them. According to this theory, first put forth by psychologist Melvin Lerner, it would be too difficult for us to live in a world in which we must acknowledge that something terrible could happen to us for no apparent reason. Thus, we falsely create a just world by attributing the suffering of others to internal, controllable causes. If he died of lung cancer at the age of 45, it was because he smoked. If she was raped, it was because of the way she'd dressed. If only X hadn't done Y, none of these terrible things would have happened to him/her. If we believe that, we don't have to acknowledge that we could have a terrible thing happen to us for no reason and without warning, and we can avoid facing that difficult reality. This explanation for the Fundamental Attribution Error clearly fits squarely into the motivational explanations—we make this attribution to protect ourselves from experiencing thoughts that generate anxiety.

The original study documenting the Just World Theory, conducted by Melvin Lerner and Carolyn Simmons in the 1960s, was fairly simple.[21] Female college students watched a fellow woman student supposedly being given painful electric shocks each time she provided a wrong answer in a learning experiment. Following the presentation of the video of the suffering woman, some participants were given a chance to reassign the woman to a different situation, one in which she would receive money instead of shocks. Most participants voted to reassign her to the reward situation, thus, in a sense, restoring justice. Other participants were told

that they could do nothing to alleviate her suffering and that she would continue to receive shocks. The participants were then asked to evaluate the victim on several dimensions, such as her likability, deservingness of respect and admiration, and likelihood of being successful. The results revealed that the victim who was reassigned to a reward situation was rated more positively than the woman who had to continue being shocked. Thus, in the face of suffering that one cannot alleviate, there seems to be a tendency to restore one's belief in a just world by derogating the victim. In other words, to comfort ourselves, we conclude that she must have done something to deserve her fate. She must not be very nice or admirable if she's suffering.

There have been many studies since this one aimed at testing various aspects of the tendency to blame victims. Though there is some controversy about the interpretation of the findings and the pervasiveness of the phenomenon, there does seem to be evidence that, at least in some circumstances, individuals are inclined to hold even apparently innocent victims responsible for their plights. One of the areas in which Just World Theory has been most applied is in regard to reactions to rape victims. As I will discuss in Chap. 3, a series of studies suggests that there is a tendency to hold the victim responsible for having been raped. This fact will probably not surprise readers who follow the media coverage of such occurrences. Even young girls who are raped are often accused of having dressed or behaved in a way that brought the attack on themselves.

A distinct but related theory that explains the tendency to ascribe internal, controllable causes for events is termed **System Justification Theory**. It applies particularly well to attributions for social problems, a major focus of this book. According to this theory, suggested by psychologists John Jost and Mahzarin Banaji, people are motivated to hold individuals responsible for both success and failure because such attributions serve to protect the current social and political system.[22] Interestingly, the theory even suggests that individuals will blame themselves for their disadvantaged position in the world in order to support the status quo. The model goes well beyond elucidating the tendency to blame the individual, but that propensity is one of the phenomena it seeks to explain.

According to this theory, people who are doing well under the current system have a psychological need to justify their position. Thus, if I am

wealthy, it makes sense that I feel entitled to what I have, to feel that I have earned it and therefore deserve it. Hence, I would be likely to make an internal, controllable attribution for my own wealth: I am wealthy because I have worked hard. One can also easily imagine such an individual making internal, controllable attributions for the lack of financial success of others. Specifically, it will make me feel better to think that the poor really deserve their disadvantaged position. Certainly, if they were as capable and hard working as I, they too would be rich. What is harder to comprehend is why the poor person himself might attribute his poverty to his own shortcomings. From a motivational perspective, wouldn't it be more comforting for a person to think well of himself and thus attribute the cause of his poverty externally? Apparently not, and that is one of the findings Jost and Banaji seek to explain with this theory. They suggest that the need to justify the current system (such as capitalism in the US) is so great that it is often even stronger than the need to protect one's ego. Thus, a person would rather think that he is poor because he is not as hard working as others than that he is poor because the system is unfair. Once the belief in the fairness of the system begins to be undermined, as might have been the case for activists in the Occupy Wall Street movement, for example, protest becomes more likely.

The idea behind System Justification Theory is not new. Nearly 150 years earlier, Karl Marx introduced the idea of false consciousness, suggesting that the ruling classes had the power to determine the dominant ideologies of a given society.[23] Given that it was to their advantage to maintain the status quo that was serving them so well, they spread system-justifying beliefs. In a sense, then, all levels of a society become predisposed to making internal attributions for their place in it. Jost and Banaji extended Marx's ideas and provided a psychological framework for understanding how this process happens. There is now considerable evidence that not only do we tend to blame victims, we may well also blame ourselves rather than face the possibility that the system is unfair. For example, these researchers have reported that women will justify their lower average pay relative to men and that Black people tend to endorse stereotypes of members of their own racial group as lazy.

The idea that people get what they deserve is pervasive, and, if not universal, at least common across many cultures. We in the US are fond

of saying, "what goes around comes around." We comfort ourselves in the face of bad behavior on the part of others by believing that eventually they will be punished, just as the good will be rewarded. Disparate religions share in common the idea that if one does not get what one deserves in this life, she surely will in the next one. In Judeo-Christian religions, those who are good are rewarded in heaven; those who are not are punished in hell. And consider the idea of Karma, common to Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, and Sikh philosophies. One Buddhist teacher addresses some core questions:

> What is the cause of the inequality that exists among mankind?
>
> Why should one person be brought up in the lap of luxury, endowed with fine mental, moral and physical qualities, and another in absolute poverty, steeped in misery?
>
> Why should one person be a mental prodigy, and another an idiot?
>
> Why should one person be born with saintly characteristics and another with criminal tendencies?
>
> Why should some be linguistic, artistic, mathematically inclined, or musical from the very cradle?
>
> Why should others be congenitally blind, deaf, or deformed?
>
> Why should some be blessed, and others cursed from their births?
>
> Either this inequality of mankind has a cause, or it is purely accidental. No sensible person would think of attributing this unevenness, this inequality, and this diversity to blind chance or pure accident.
>
> **In this world nothing happens to a person that he does not for some reason or other deserve**.[24]

Ideologies have to account for apparently undeserved suffering, and they generally do so by suggesting that in fact the suffering is deserved. Whether we believe that justice will be delivered in the afterlife or that suffering in the present life was earned in a previous one, we strive to view the universe as fair.

Other ideologies or worldviews, terms that I use interchangeably, can be considered biases of a sort. Time after time in the pages that follow, you will see that religious and political ideologies nudge us to place blame in particular ways, particularly when the national discourse links those ideologies to specific issues. For example, religious worldviews are strongly

linked to abortion attitudes in the US, whereas political ideology is linked to attitudes toward welfare. As you might have guessed, one's cultural worldview influences the causal attribution process as well.

Culture and Blame

This book will be focused primarily on how blame operates in the US, but we will also consider some research on other countries. And though there is evidence that the attributional model applies in many other societies,[25] some perceptions of causality and blame do vary across cultures. What I'm about to discuss might weaken some of my arguments a bit, but I would be remiss in not considering some exceptions to the claims I'm making here.

Consider, for example, the Fundamental Attribution Error, the tendency to make an internal, dispositional attribution for an action rather an external, situational one. This tendency, which is so pervasive in the U.S. and other Western cultures, relies, to some degree, on an individualistic worldview. As we will discuss, individualism is paramount in the US. We tend to view the individual as a unique independent agent, responsible for her own successes and failures. Many other cultures, particularly, though not exclusively, in Asia and Latin America, instead value collectivism, which conceives of the individual as part of a web of relationships and prioritizes group cohesion and group interest over individual agency. Thus, people from collectivist cultures tend to have an interdependent self-concept, whereas those from individualistic cultures are more likely to develop an independent self-concept.[26]

The difference is often demonstrated in college courses in psychology by asking students to write "I am _____" on a piece of paper several times and then fill in the blank with whatever quickly comes to mind. Try it if you haven't before. What do you notice?

American college students most frequently complete the sentence with traits, such as "I am extroverted" or "I am athletic" or "I am shy." But, as we discuss in class, individuals from collectivist cultures are more likely to complete the sentences with roles and group identities, such as "I am a daughter" or "I am Asian American" or "I am a member of the soccer

team." This fundamental difference in views of the self and others gives rise to different interpretations of a range of social situations.[27]

One of the most empirically supported differences between people from collectivist and individualist cultures in regard to perceptions of causality relates to the Fundamental Attribution Error. A great deal of research has shown that those from collectivist cultures are less likely to demonstrate this error.[28] In other words, they are less likely to assume that an action indicates something about the individual's disposition and more likely to ascribe the behavior to the situation. Research suggests that collectivists are more aware of situational forces that can affect an individual and take the whole picture of the situation and the person into account.[29]

In addition, there is evidence that some judgments of individuals and groups are more strongly associated with perceptions of responsibility in individualist than collectivist cultures. For example, Chris Crandall and colleagues collected data on attitudes toward obesity in six different cultures.[30] They documented that the link between responsibility perceptions (blame of the individual) for obesity was more strongly associated with anti-fat attitudes in individualist cultures than collectivist cultures. The authors argue that the model of anti-fat prejudice, which relies on blaming individuals for their own fatness, does not hold up as well in collectivist cultures. Whereas blaming someone for their situation appears to be a major part of prejudice in the U.S. and other individualistic cultures, it seems to be less so in collectivist ones. We will consider the link of blame to racial prejudice in Chap. 4.

To test whether helping judgments are influenced by culture, Elizabeth Mullen and Linda Skitka examined differences between Americans and Ukrainians in making decisions about who was most deserving of an organ transplant.[31] Participants were presented with descriptions of possible recipients and ask to choose those who should receive an organ transplant. Some of the recipients were described as responsible for their illness due to poor health habits, and others were described as not responsible, having a genetically defective organ. The vignettes also provided information about the individual's contributions to society such as whether they do volunteer work. As predicted, Americans tended to offer more help to those held less responsible for their plight, allocating to

those with a genetic defect over those with an unhealthy lifestyle. On the other hand, they found that Ukrainians, who tend to hold collectivist values, relied less on personal responsibility for the need than did Americans. That is, blame of the individual for their situation was a less important factor in helping decisions for the Ukrainians than the Americans. Ukrainians, instead, were more influenced than Americans by the individual's contributions to society, helping those who'd contributed more. Thus, there is some evidence that blame might be less influential in helping decisions in collectivist cultures. If one is more concerned with doing what is in the best interest of the group rather than with rewarding people for good behavior, then a focus on an individual's responsibility becomes less important.

What about punishment? Recall that the attributional model suggests that when we perceive another as not to blame for their negative situation, we experience sympathy and want to help, whereas if they are perceived as to blame, we are more likely to experience anger and not want to help or perhaps even punish. So, if collectivists see behavior as more determined by the situation than the individual, and responsibility judgments are less central, is punishment lower in collectivist cultures? Not necessarily; rather, it depends on different factors.

A recent study investigated this interesting paradox: if collectivist cultures are more likely to make situational attributions that do not blame the individual for a negative situation, then one might expect such cultures to punish less; however, this is not the case.[32] The researchers point out that China, Thailand, and Vietnam, for example, are collectivist cultures with high rates of incarceration and capital punishment. In other words, they appear to be relatively high in punishment for wrongdoing. In a series of studies, participants from China and the US responded to vignettes describing a negative situation by rating the degree of personal agency of the actor, responsibility, blame, the severity of the consequences of the act (how much harm it caused), and punishment. Interestingly, they found that Americans based punishment very heavily on agency, responsibility, and blame, whereas the Chinese respondents based the punishment more on the severity of the consequences. In the Chinese sample, the more harm that was caused, the higher the punishment; for the American sample, higher agency, responsibility, and blame were

associated with more severe punishment. The authors conclude that individualistic cultures, with their focus on individual agency and accountability, are concerned with the punishment the individual *deserves*. Those from collectivist cultures are more concerned with preserving social harmony and deterring future harm. The American emphasis on balancing the scales of justice requires a different approach than the Chinese focus on benefitting the group.

Thus, although the core attributional model linking individual controllability and blame to emotional reactions to behavior has held up in many studies and in a number of countries,[33] there is some evidence that it might not operate in exactly the same way across all cultures. It is increasingly clear that American and other Western cultures are particularly focused on blame. And because we are immersed in a culture, it is like the air we breathe, powerful in its effects but invisible to us. It is thus hard for individualists to imagine a system in which blame does not decrease helping and increase punishment. However, it is instructive to imagine other possibilities as it helps us to become aware of the assumptions behind our judgments. That said, at the time of this writing, the attributional model outlined here has been found to hold up very widely.

A Note About the Term "Bias"

By referring to particular tendencies as biases, I seem to be implying that there is some verifiable truth about causes of events so that one can judge whether a particular causal conclusion is accurate or unfair. So, for example, if I suggest that people are predisposed toward blaming the individual, I could be perceived as indicating that individuals are never to blame and that to do so would always be inaccurate or prejudiced. This conclusion would of course not hold true. Sometimes the cause of an event does lie within an individual. If I trip and fall while walking on a regular basis, it probably is fair and accurate to label me as clumsy. And it is certainly possible that a person's lack of success really is attributable to low motivation. The bias comes in when we hold the individual responsible with very little reason to do so.

It is also important to note that social psychologists, as I recall being told by a chuckling professor when I was a graduate student, are not really interested in reality. We are interested in how people *perceive* reality. As you will see in the pages that follow, my goal is not to explain what really causes poverty, racial inequality, or unwanted pregnancies. There are many other books with this aim, and they unfortunately reveal that social scientists are far from achieving any sort of consensus on these issues. My goal is rather to show how our assumptions about the causes of various social problems influence our attitudes and behaviors in regard to them. I am not so much setting out to change anyone's beliefs about causality as I am to illuminate how those beliefs influence our reactions and why people's responses to particular issues can seem so dramatically opposed to one another. I also hope to convince you that there is a lot more to political attitudes than political ideology.

Worldview: Is American Polarization a Myth?

People often assume that their political attitudes and behaviors are dictated by worldviews, such as political orientation, religious ideology, and moral belief system. John opposes welfare because he's a Republican; Janet favors legal abortion because she's a feminist; Jasmine is opposed to gay marriage because she's a fundamentalist Christian, and so on. Thus, we appear to be in engaged in a war between cultures in the US.

One of the questions raised by this book is whether our current focus on the "Culture Wars" has in fact exaggerated the degree to which worldviews such as political ideology and moral beliefs dictate our attitudes and whether the country really is as deeply divided on moral issues as some political pundits have suggested. Since the "red state-blue state" division in voting was identified after the 2000 election, there has been a proliferation of newspaper articles and books on the subject. The media seized upon the idea that the US can be neatly divided into two different sectors, the progressive blue states and the traditional red states. In the words of political scientist Morris Fiorina:

> Often commentators accompanied such colorful maps with polling factoids intended to illustrate the cultural divide: the probability that a white, gun-toting, born-again, rural southern male voted for Al Gore was about as tiny as the probability that a feminist, agnostic, professional, urban northern female voted for George W. Bush, although few asked how many Americans fell into such tightly bounded categories.[34]

Actually, Fiorina contends, most Americans could be considered pragmatic moderates on the majority of political issues facing the country. Not all social scientists agree with Fiorina that issue polarization is a myth, with some researchers finding evidence that Americans have grown farther apart on many issues;[35] however, even if polarization has increased, it appears to have been exaggerated.[36] That said, my point is not that political ideology has no effect on political attitudes; rather, I suggest that when we focus exclusively on ideology and ignore the process through which ideology influences attitude, we oversimplify political decision-making.

I will argue here that responsibility is one of the primary pragmatic considerations Americans attend to when they are forming their opinions on particular social problems and the appropriate solutions. In fact, as you will see in the pages that follow, blame has emerged as the missing link connecting ideology to attitude across a range of issues. The current focus on worldview that Fiorina takes issue with indicates a simple direct link between worldview and attitude. When we say that one person is Pro-Life because he's a Fundamentalist Christian or that another supports welfare because she's a liberal, we ignore the process that connects worldview with attitude. Both liberals and conservatives make judgments about the cause of the problem, such as unwanted pregnancy or poverty, and the way they place blame influences their attitude toward the solution (abortion or welfare). And importantly, both liberals and conservatives are less than enthusiastic about programs that help a person who is perceived as to blame for the cause of his negative plight. This fact points to another reason to focus on blame over ideology: it offers more promise for finding common ground between those on opposite sides of the ideological divide. As we will consider in the last chapter, though it would be difficult to change a person's worldview, there is evidence that perceptions of blame can be influenced, allowing for the possibility of finding areas of agreement between those on the right and those on the left.

Because judgments of causality and blame are so central to our daily lives and our political attitudes, the process of judging others is critical for us to understand. Returning to the examples with which we began, it was the belief that Iraq was partially to blame for the 9/11 attacks on the US that convinced many Americans of the need to go to war with that country, and blame for the state of the economy may well determine whom you vote for in the next election. In fact, political discussions and debates often turn out to be a contest in who can more convincingly lay blame for the country's problems on the other guy or at least the other guy's party. In the words of former Vice President Hubert Humphrey, "To err is human. To blame someone else is politics."

Plan of the Book

In the chapters that follow, we will consider how the blame model plays out in regard to a number of controversial social and political issues. We will begin with economic issues in Chap. 2 because those perhaps provide the most commonsense application of the theory. How do our beliefs about the causes of poverty influence our attitudes toward welfare? How does blame for a bad economy influence our evaluations of the president? In Chap. 3, we will discuss issues of sexuality. How do perceptions of the causes of unwanted pregnancy influence our attitudes toward abortion? Do beliefs about the causes of homosexuality influence our attitudes toward gay and lesbian rights? And finally, why are victims of sexual assault and harassment so often blamed, and what effect does that blame have? Chapter 4 focuses on racial inequality, particularly why Americans increasingly endorse the idea that the races should be equal but mostly reject policies that would increase equality. Specifically, we will consider how beliefs about the causes of inequality affect opinions of policies, such as Affirmative Action. And we will consider the role of blame perceptions in current controversies such as police brutality toward Black Americans and the teaching of systemic racism in schools. We will move to political violence in Chap. 5, considering how perceptions of the causes of actions that escalate or de-escalate conflict influence opinions about that conflict as well as how perceptions of the causes of terrorism and of mass

shootings relate to policy attitudes. Chapter 6 will focus on blame in the age of Trump. How did he strategically place blame on particular groups in order to fire up his base constituents, and how did he manage blame while in office? And finally, in Chap. 7, we will discuss the most important conclusions we can draw from the research and consider how perceptions of blame for social problems can be influenced. I promise, there is a message of hope! Because worldviews are so hard to change, I suggest that we'd be better off focusing on causes and blame if we want to influence someone's position on an issue. There is evidence that it can be done!

Notes

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2

Economic Issues

The Undeserving Poor

Ben Carson, retired neurosurgeon and secretary of housing and urban development under President Trump offered his view of the reason some people are poor: "I think poverty to a large extent is also a state of mind." He continued: "You take somebody that has the right mindset, you can take everything from them and put them on the street, and I guarantee in a little while they'll be right back up there. And you take somebody with the wrong mindset, you could give them everything in the world, they'll work their way right back down to the bottom."[1] The idea that the successful people are those who deserve success and that the poor are so because of their own moral failings is a hallmark of capitalism, and it has a long history in the US.

Historian Michael Katz traces this moral approach to poverty to early nineteenth-century attempts to make a distinction between different sorts of poor people.[2] For example, there was an effort to distinguish between those who were genuinely needy and those who were trying to take advantage of the system. The poverty laws in Massachusetts in the early 1800s divided the poor into the "impotent poor" who were unable

G. Sahar, *Blame and Political Attitudes*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-20236-0_2

to work and the "able poor" who would be capable of some type of work. Similarly, there were efforts to distinguish between the poor and paupers. According to Katz, the term "pauper" referred to a person who was a recipient of public relief and originated as an administrative category. Being poor at that time was not stigmatized, but being a pauper was. Katz quotes the Reverend Charles Burroughs speaking at the opening of a new chapel in a Portsmouth, New Hampshire, poorhouse:

> In speaking of poverty, let us never forget that there is a distinction between this and pauperism. The former is an unavoidable evil, to which many are brought from necessity, and in the wise and gracious Providence of God. It is the result, not of our faults, but of our misfortunes…Pauperism is the consequence of willful error, of shameful indolence, of vicious habits. It is a misery of human creation, the pernicious work of man, the lamentable consequence of bad principles and morals.[3]

Katz argues that this distinction between paupers and the poor gradually disappeared in favor of treating all poverty as resulting from the moral failings of the poor. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the metamorphosis was complete, and the poor were generally viewed as to blame for their state. According to Katz, "In the nineteenth century, asking for relief became a sign of individual failure; no label carried a greater stigma than pauper."

Interest in poverty resurged in the early 1960s when it was discovered that in spite of a period of economic growth, a significant percentage of Americans were still poor. At the time President Lyndon Johnson declared his "War on Poverty" in 1964, the poverty rate was about 19%. A slightly revised view of poverty was embraced during that period: the culture of poverty. Though it seemed less derogatory than the nineteenth-century understanding of poverty, it still placed responsibility for poverty on the poor themselves. Originally suggested by anthropologist Oscar Lewis, this approach held that poverty became a sort of lifestyle passed down from one generation to the next.[4] Lewis stated:

> Once the culture of poverty has come into existence it tends to perpetuate itself. By the time slum children are six or seven they have usually absorbed the basic attitudes and values of their subculture. Thereafter they are

> psychologically unready to take full advantage of changing conditions or improving opportunities that make develop in their lifetime.[5]

Lewis theorized that a number of character flaws are associated with those who adopt the culture of poverty, such as low impulse control and ability to delay gratification, weak ego development, fatalistic apathetic attitudes, to name just a few. Lewis cautioned that only about 20% of the poor were trapped in the culture of poverty, but unfortunately, that caveat was lost as the theory was appropriated by, in Katz's words, "conservatives in search of a modern academic label for the undeserving poor."

In his classic book, *Blaming the Victim*,[6] William Ryan describes the outcome of this cultural approach to poverty. Were one to define poverty as simply a lack of money, then the obvious solution is a redistribution of wealth; only a small portion of the gross national product would be required to bring the poor above the poverty line. However, he states,

> if poverty is to be understood more clearly in terms of a "lower class culture", as a product of a deviant value system, then money is clearly not the answer. We can stop right now worrying about ways of redistributing our resources more equitably, and begin focusing our concern where it belongs—on the poor themselves. We can start trying to figure out how to change that troublesome culture of theirs, how to apply some tautening astringent to their flabby consciences, how to deal with their poor manners and make them more socially acceptable. By this hard and wearying method of liquidating the lower class culture, we can liquidate the lower class, and thereby, bring an end to poverty.[7]

This approach to poverty as a way of life from which one cannot escape was echoed many years later by Bill Clinton in his 1992 run for president. In one ad, he said: "I have a plan to end welfare as we know it—to break the cycle of welfare dependency." After describing his initiatives that would provide support to the poor (such as training and childcare) but require the recipient to work, he finishes, "It's time to make welfare what is should be: a second chance, not a way of life." The main goal of Clinton's welfare reform, a version of which passed in 1996, was to halt the intergenerational transmission of the culture of poverty, suggesting that the cultural explanation was still in vogue.[8] Interestingly, the bill was

entitled the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, reinforcing the idea that responsibility for poverty fell on the poor themselves.

Of course, the assumption that the poor are to blame for their own situation is consistent with the ideals of a capitalist system and America as the land of opportunity where anyone could succeed. So, it is not surprising that it is endorsed to some extent by both Republicans and Democrats. In her examination of the American dream, political scientist Jennifer Hochschild identifies its four tenets, two of which relate directly to responsibility and blame: the idea that success results from actions and traits that are within one's personal control and that success is associated with virtue, whereas failure is associated with evil.[9] Nonetheless, as Hochschild documents in her extensive study of these beliefs, not all Americans continue to believe in this ideology. Not surprisingly then, there are variations in Americans' beliefs about the causes of poverty.

A series of psychological and sociological studies has been conducted since the early 1970s examining beliefs about the causes of poverty. The earliest of these, by Joe Feagin,[10] identified 11 causes of poverty that were divided into three types: individualistic causes, such as laziness, that blame the poor themselves; structural causes, such as lack of available jobs, that hold society responsible; and fatalistic causes, such as bad luck. He reported that most Americans endorsed individualistic causes, but there was considerable variation among people due to a variety of demographic factors, such as gender, race, income, and education. Later studies supported both the classification of causes into these three types and the American preference for individualistic causes.

In an effort to more systematically apply attribution theory to the issue of poverty, Bernard Weiner and I conducted two studies that tested the full causal perception-blame-emotion-action model presented in the last chapter.[11] In the first study, we gathered data from college students, and in the second, participants were non-student adults. We asked participants to rate the importance of 13 causes of poverty categorized according to Feagin's original taxonomy, as individualistic, structural, and fatalistic (see Fig. 2.1). However, we also measured a number of responses in regard to each cause that had not previously been considered. We asked participants to rate the degree to which this cause was controllable, as well as how much they blamed the person who was poor due to this

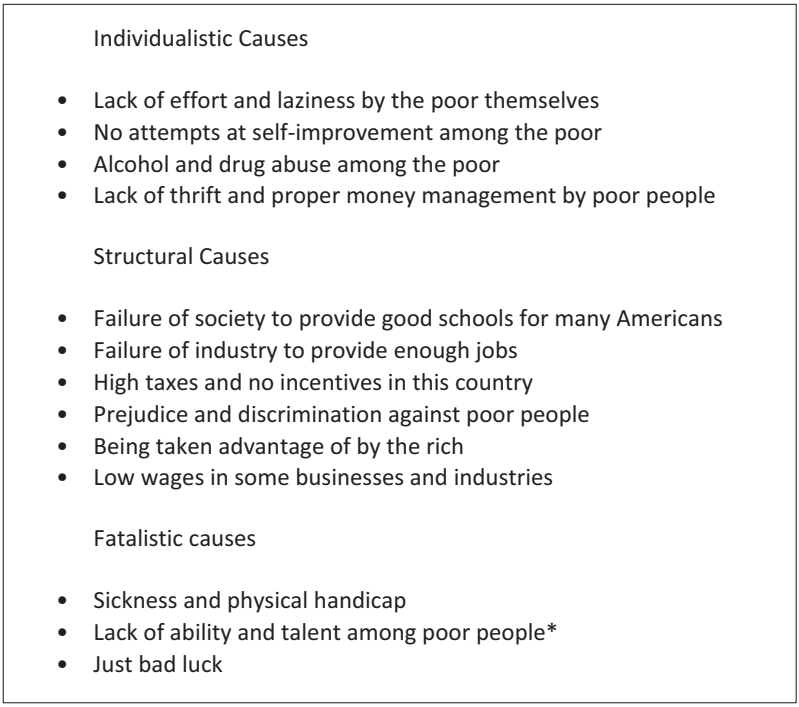

Fig. 2.1 The 13 causes of poverty divided by type. (From Zucker, G.S. (nee Sahar) & Weiner, B. (1993). Conservatism and perceptions of poverty: An attributional analysis. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 23*, 925–943)

cause. We also assessed their emotions of pity and anger toward the individual. Finally, we asked participants about their likelihood of helping the poor person either personally or by endorsing government assistance such as welfare. In addition, we measured participants' political conservatism. The results revealed a clear pattern of responses. Conservatives were more likely to endorse individualistic causes of poverty, whereas liberals tended to rate the societal and fatalistic causes as important. We also found that the more the poor were perceived to be responsible for poverty, the more they were blamed, the less pity and the more anger was aroused, and the less likely were judgments to help either personally or through government assistance. Thus, the attributional model was supported by the data, showing that the degree to which one blames poor

people for their situation is strongly associated with one's emotional reactions toward the poor and attitudes toward welfare.

Some additional findings in regard to political ideology are also important to note. A sophisticated statistical technique allowed us to evaluate the links between all of the participants' reactions, both direct links and those that are mediated by other responses. A mediating response is one that acts as a conduit between other responses; for example, one response affects the mediating one, which in turn affects a third one. This analysis indicated that political conservatism is associated with opposition to government assistance to the poor both directly and through the mediating responses of blame and emotion. Thus, it appears that conservatives object to welfare as a direct consequence of their worldview and also because they are more likely to believe poverty is caused by factors that are within the control of the poor themselves. This perception logically leads to higher blame of the poor for poverty and therefore less pity for them, which subsequently results in a negative attitude toward welfare.

This dual effect of worldview is not unique to the issue of poverty. We will see this pattern again with other issues in the chapters that follow: *worldviews (religious beliefs, moral views, liberal-conservative ideologies) exert their influence on our attitudes in part by dictating how we place blame*. It will become clear that blaming an individual for his fate is an important component of many belief systems. Much like the biases discussed in the last chapter, ideologies can predispose a person to make particular kinds of causal attributions. Thus, we can add a worldview component to the attributional model. We can also expand the last component (behavior) to include attitude since we see that attitude toward welfare (should it be provided or not) as well as behavioral intention (willingness to personally help the poor) are both outcomes of the attribution process. I use the term "attitude" simply to mean someone's stance on an issue such as welfare (for, against, or in between) (Fig. 2.2).

The direct path from worldview to attitude, such as from political conservatism to welfare, can be conceived of as a sort of automatic response. This response is explained by the fact that individuals develop, in the words of the researchers, "symbolic predispositions" or emotional reactions toward some political symbols early in life.[12] Later in life, when they encounter these symbols, the predispositions are activated.

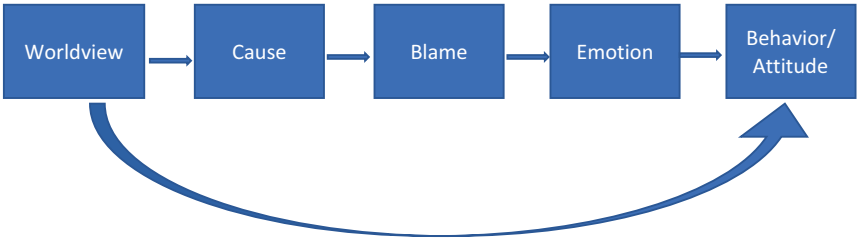

Fig. 2.2 Expanded attributional model with worldview and attitude

For example, many children learn to associate positive emotion with the American flag. As adults, they continue to have a strong positive response to this symbol, hence the outrage when someone is seen to have disrespected the flag. Or perhaps you have a strong positive or negative emotional response to particular political figures, such as Martin Luther King or Hitler, and feel a rush of positive feelings when you see a picture of the former and a rush of negative ones in response to the latter.

You could think of these reactions as the sort of conditioned response you might have learned about if you ever took an introductory psychology class. In his famous experiments, Ivan Pavlov conditioned dogs to associate being fed with the sound of a bell. The learned association between the bell and food caused them to begin to salivate every time the bell rang. Similarly, we can associate particular emotions with political symbols or political terms. Thus, if one is socialized in such a way that negative emotion is attached to terms such as "welfare" and "abortion," that emotion is likely to be aroused whenever the term is encountered. Hence, a particular worldview might predispose us to have an immediate negative or positive response to terms like "abortion" or "welfare," which is represented by the curved direct arrow from worldview to attitude in the above model. However, research suggests that we do not only have this automatic response, we can also be prompted to engage our minds. If we are asked to consider the cause of the situation, whether the person or people in the situation are blameworthy, and so on, we also arrive at a position on welfare, which is represented by the straight arrows above. *The important point is that the popular press tends to focus exclusively on the automatic response and ignore the more reasoned one.*

Note that individuals perceive causality in a way that is consistent with their overall belief system, a pattern we will see again and again. Conservatives, who are more likely to want to preserve the current system would be unlikely to endorse causes suggesting that the system is flawed (that hard-working people are poor). Liberals, who are less averse to the idea of changing the system, would be more likely to subscribe to causes that indicate that the current system is problematic. Nonetheless, there is commonality in terms of the effects of attributions of causality. Both liberals and conservatives are more enthusiastic about assisting an individual who is not to blame for his situation than one who is to blame. And both liberal and conservative Americans are living in a culture that is built upon the idea of a connection between virtue and success and that anyone who tries hard enough can succeed.

An interesting set of studies has in fact demonstrated that when there are clear cues in regard to a welfare recipient's deservingness of receiving aid, the effects of ideology and culture are severely reduced.[13] Michael Bang Petersen and colleagues suggest that when one is faced with making a decision about welfare, a "deservingness heuristic" is triggered. Heuristics are cognitive short-cuts or quick decision-making rules that allow people to arrive at decisions without much thought. Petersen maintains that human beings have evolved to be able to quickly evaluate deservingness. He suggests that because we are social animals and must be able to rely on others, we automatically categorize them as "reciprocators" (individuals who we could count on to help us) or "cheaters" (individuals who are happy to benefit from help without reciprocating). He and his colleagues have documented that when people read a short vignette about a welfare recipient that has clear cues about whether the person is lazy (poor due to lack of effort) or unlucky (high in effort but poor through no fault of his own), they are able to quickly decide to support welfare (for the unlucky) and restrict it (for the lazy) regardless of their values. That is, those high and low in egalitarianism respond essentially the same. In addition, he finds that Americans and Danish respondents also respond similarly in the presence of such cues, even though the US is a more individualistic culture and less comfortable with welfare. Thus, political ideology, values, and culture might only exert a strong influence on welfare decisions in the absence of clear cues about deservingness.

Further, though worldview might predispose one to endorse particular causes of poverty, there are other factors that influence these judgments. For example, it has been reported that middle-class Americans are more likely to attribute poverty to individualistic over structural causes of poverty, whereas the pattern is reversed among poor Americans. [14] This finding supports the actor-observer bias discussed in Chap. 1 that holds that individuals are more likely to blame external factors for their own behaviors, whereas observers are more likely to blame the individual actor. The same study also discovered that the middle class more strongly believes in the culture of poverty hypothesis (that poverty is a permanent condition that perpetuates laziness and low self-esteem) than do the poor themselves. Another study documented that individuals living in counties where the poor are mostly white are less likely to endorse individualistic causes of poverty, suggesting that racism (another worldview) may be a factor in poverty beliefs.[15] We will focus on Americans' beliefs about the socioeconomic status of Black citizens in Chap. 4 on race. The role of worldview, however, is the most thoroughly documented predictor of attributions for poverty. Those who are politically conservative, Republican, and authoritarian (submissive to established authority, subscribing to social conventions and strong punishment for those who violate them) and who endorse the Protestant work ethic (emphasizing the importance of hard work, individual achievement, and discipline) are particularly likely to blame the poor themselves for poverty. [16] The effect of worldview on blame will become even more apparent in the following section on citizens' perceptions of the economy.

"It's the Economy, Stupid"

Among the most researched topics in political psychology is the simple question of how much thinking people do before they vote. Do they vote reflexively based on intuitive preferences, automatically choosing candidates and positions without much thought at all? Or do they think about the qualifications and performance of the candidate, their policies, and other more rational considerations? That is, are voters rational?

One of the most significant contributions to the nonrational side of this argument was the seminal book published in 1960, *The American Voter*, [17] by University of Michigan social scientists Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes. They presented a view of the electorate that had a profound impact on the field. They argued that the majority of Americans are largely ignorant of politics, do not have coherent belief systems, and therefore vote largely on the basis of their political affiliation. If one identifies as a Democrat, she will vote for Democrats with very little thought about the candidates' positions or policies. This study presented a grim view of Americans as disaffected, nonideological, and politically ignorant. To make matters worse, there is strong evidence that partisanship tends to be handed down from parents. Most Americans share the same political party as their parents, so in a way we are not even choosing our party so much as accepting it. Beyond that, most Americans were found to have little knowledge of the specific policies associated with the parties. Specifically, even those voters informed enough to hold an opinion on an issue were unable to identify which party held a position closer to their own. These researchers clearly painted a picture of Americans as spending very little time reflecting on voting decisions.

The book was influential for a number of reasons, not the least of which was that it relied on carefully collected data from large numbers of people. It also came out during the so-called behavioralist revolution in political science and fit well with that approach. Behavioralist political scientists wanted the discipline to become like the natural sciences, only focusing on verifiable facts. The researchers' use of sophisticated sampling, surveying, and methods of analysis made the book particularly appealing. There are of course many critiques of the book's conclusions, some of which concern the question of whether they stood up to the test of time. There is evidence that the period of the 1950s was unusual in that Americans were more passive, compliant, and nonideological than they have been since[18] Later work suggested that Americans have become increasingly focused on issues in their voting, contradicting *The American Voter*, and the idea that Americans have well-formed ideological orientations has come back into vogue.[19] Nonetheless, there is no question that partisanship continues to have a strong influence on voting and should not be ignored.

On the other end of the spectrum is the economic theory of voting, which holds that citizens do rationally process information about candidates rather than voting reflexively based on party identification. In some of its forms, it represents the most extreme "human as rational information processor" position. According to this theory, citizens are both rational and self-interested in their voting decisions. They vote for the politician or policy that will maximize their gains and minimize their losses. As Anthony Downs described *homo politicus* or the rational citizen according to the economic model: "We assume that he approaches every situation with one eye on the gains to be had, the other eye on costs, a delicate ability to balance them, and a strong desire to follow wherever rationality leads him."[20] Even he admitted that this assumption is not entirely accurate. Nonetheless, modified versions of this theory have held up. Certainly, few social scientists today would endorse the idea that political decision-makers are completely rational; however, there is evidence that citizens do process information about the performance of politicians and that the conclusions they draw often affect their voting behavior.

One of the cornerstones of democracy is the idea of putting citizens in charge of evaluating the performance of elected officials and voting accordingly. Politicians can be held accountable. Political scientist V.O. Key first articulated this reward-punishment model of economic voting.[21] According to this model, citizens would be expected to reward an incumbent governing party when economic conditions have improved and punish it when they have worsened. The model makes common sense and is consistent with some real-world examples. Many candidates have based their campaigns on the idea that citizens want to vote for the party most likely to improve the economy.

No one who was alive and paying any attention to politics in the early 1990s can forget the Clinton campaign's mantra: "It's the economy, stupid." Clinton's aide James Carville coined the phrase to remind Clinton's team that they should keep focusing on the economy in their bid to unseat George H.W. Bush in the 1992 election. The assumption underlying this strategy was that Americans vote according to their pocketbooks, rewarding the incumbent if the economic situation of the voter (and the country) is good and punishing him if it's bad. Bush had extremely high

approval ratings after the invasion of Iraq in the early 1991. Then along came an economic recession. Clinton won the election.

Ronald Reagan also kept Americans focused on their pocketbooks when running against incumbent Jimmy Carter in 1980 by asking Americans if they were better off than they were four years ago. The debate in which he first asked that question was considered a turning point in the election, which Reagan went on to win.

One might think, based on a purely logical approach, that anytime an incumbent is running during an economic downturn, he or she will lose. Unfortunately for Mitt Romney, who ran unsuccessfully against Barack Obama in the wake of a major recession in 2012, that is not true. Why did the model not hold up here?

It is here that attribution theory can shed some light. Hundreds of academic papers on the topic of economic voting have focused on explaining exactly how it works. Why do some studies and some real-world elections provide evidence that citizens vote based on the state of the economy while others do not? The answer to that question lies in blame. Considerable research suggests that citizens do not automatically vote against an incumbent if the state of the economy is poor; rather, they embark on the attributional process of identifying who is responsible or to blame for the situation and vote accordingly. Why did Obama win during an economic recession? Because despite Romney's critiques of Obama's economic policies, most Americans did not blame Obama for the state of the economy; rather, they blamed his predecessor George W. Bush.[22] In fact, Bush continued to shoulder more blame even at the end of Obama's second term in office.[23]

Thus, it turns out that the missing piece in much of the political science research on this topic was blame. Most investigators did not specifically examine whom their participants held responsible for the state of the economy. Adding that factor in greatly improves the accuracy of the model's predictions.

Another interesting question is whether it's the state of the economy in general that influences how a person votes or whether a citizen's individual financial situation has an effect. Reagan asked voters to think about whether they were better off, not whether the economy had improved. A significant body of research documents that the state of the economy in

general has a bigger effect on vote. This might be surprising as it could be argued one's own financial situation would seem more immediate and powerful. Why then does it not have much of an effect? The reason again lies in the placement of blame. Individuals tend to blame themselves for their personal financial circumstances and therefore the governing party is not held accountable.

This tendency to be unable to see the connection between one's own personal situation and the broader political environment was suggested much earlier by sociologist C. Wright Mills in his groundbreaking 1959 book *The Sociological Imagination.* In Wright's words:

> Yet men do not usually define the troubles they endure in terms of historical change and institutional contradiction. The well-being they enjoy, they do not usually impute to the big ups and downs of the societies in which they live. Seldom aware of the intricate connection between the patterns of their own lives and the course of world history, ordinary men do not usually know what this connection means for the kinds of men they are becoming and for the kinds of history-making in which they might take part. They do not possess the quality of mind essential to grasp the interplay of man and society, of biography and history, of self and world. They cannot cope with their personal troubles in such ways as to control the structural transformations that usually lie behind them.[24]

Political scientists Brad Gomez and Matthew Wilson subjected Mills' idea to an empirical test. They suggested that attributing one's own situation to society-wide trends requires pretty sophisticated reasoning. Indeed, they find evidence that more politically aware and complex thinkers are more likely to hold more distant forces like government policy responsible for individual circumstances. The old feminist motto of the 1970s "The personal is political" turns out to reflect complex reasoning skills. Thus, the government benefits from the inability or unwillingness of many voters to understand the possible effects of political and economic policies on their own personal circumstances. If one is unable to see how the administration's policies affect one's income, then blame of the government is withheld, and the individual might vote to reelect the candidate responsible for her own decline. This idea will be returned to in the chapter on blame in the Trump era.

The upshot of all of this is that the influence of the state of the economy on voting is well established but more complicated than originally thought. Sometimes it is unclear who is responsible, such as in the case of an economic downturn that started under one administration and continued during another. The lines of responsibility are also fuzzy when we have a divided government, a Republican president, and a Democratic congress or vice versa. It is difficult to know exactly whom to blame.

Beyond those rational calculations, we must acknowledge that evaluations of politicians, like our evaluations of people in general, are not without bias. Consider two voters, John, a Democrat and Susan, a Republican. Which one is more likely to hold a Republican president responsible for a failing economy? One does not need a degree in political science or psychology to know that John will be more likely to place blame on a Republican president and vote for a Democrat, whereas Susan will prefer to blame a Democrat and vote for a Republican. And sometimes there need not be a shred of evidence in favor of a particular causal attribution for partisans to endorse it. For example, even though George W. Bush was president when Hurricane Katrina ravaged New Orleans, one poll reported that 29% of Louisiana Republicans later blamed Obama for the federal government's ineffective response to the disaster![25] This tendency to make attributions that fit our political leanings raises concerns about our ability to hold our leaders accountable. If we always view the facts through the screen of our political affiliation, will Democrats always blame Republicans and vice versa?

Fortunately, as strong as the influence of political party is on voting, the influence is not as automatic or reliable as held in the *American Voter* discussed at the outset of this section. The authors argued that the majority of Americans are largely ignorant about politics, do not have coherent belief systems, and therefore vote largely on the basis of their political affiliation. The latest research suggests that although partisanship affects how we view the state of the economy and whom we blame, we are not immune to the facts. When the facts about the state of the economy are mixed, people tend to interpret them in a way that flatters their own political party. On the other hand, when all information points to the fact that the economy is doing great or terribly, partisans respond in accordance with that information even if it is detrimental to their party

identification, according to recent research by Evan Parker-Stephen. In his words, "When the directional meaning of policy facts is unavoidable, party identifiers draw highly similar factual interpretations. Thus, when a democracy most needs it, party identifiers appear not to challenge competent governance. They form the sort of opinions policy advocates hope for and democratic theorists expect."[26] Those Louisiana Republicans notwithstanding, many people do consider the facts.

Were it not for this ability of partisans to vote not only according to their party loyalty but also in response to the current situation, we would not have had Republicans who voted for Clinton or Obama, nor would Democrats have voted for the Bushes or Reagan. In 2019, four Republican governors of blue states were among the most popular five governors in the country (in order of popularity, Charlie Baker of Massachusetts, Larry Hogan of Maryland, Chris Sununu of New Hampshire, and Phil Scott of Vermont).[27] This fact was particularly remarkable given that three of these states (Massachusetts, Maryland, and Vermont) are overwhelmingly Democratic (the bluest of the blue!) and have been for some time.

Nonetheless, there is also evidence that even though partisans are influenced by factual information, such as in regard to the state of the economy, they selectively place blame in a way that is most flattering to the party. Martin Bisgaard conducted a study examining the responses of party identifiers in the US and in Denmark.[28] He reported that though partisans did update their perceptions of the state of the economy based on positive or negative information, they tended to attribute responsibility in such a way as to protect their own party from blame and assign it to the other party. Thus, the evidence about how partisanship influences the reception of factual information is complicated and still evolving.

Unfortunately, much of the current discourse on voting focuses exclusively on partisanship and ideological differences, causing us to underestimate the effects of perceptions of blame for the problems we face. Interestingly, although most studies have focused on how blame for the state of the economy affects voting, there is evidence that blame (or credit) for other circumstances also influences voters' behavior. One recent study documented that presidents elicit more credit for success and more blame for failure in regard to foreign policy issues, particularly war, than for the economy.[29] In fact, there is evidence that as the number

of American casualties of war mounts, those politicians associated with the war are penalized at the ballot box. Studies have suggested that the increasing number of American casualties in Iraq was linked with George W. Bush's relative underperformance when he ran for reelection in 2004 (he won but not by as much as expected)[30] and that Hillary Clinton's defeat in her 2016 run against Donald Trump was due in part to her support of both the wars in Iraq and Libya, which Trump constantly raised during the campaign.[31]

Of course, the fact that citizens hold politicians accountable when they are found to be at fault for the state of the economy or for other negative situations, such as those resulting from failed domestic or foreign policies or personal misbehavior, means that politicians must, if they are to succeed, become adept at managing those blame perceptions. Just like all of us, politicians prefer to take credit for success and avoid blame for failure. However, it has been suggested that politicians are more motivated to minimize blame than to maximize credit. Citizens seem to be more aware of and likely to take action based on losses than on gains. As political scientist Kent Weaver said, "voters are more sensitive to what has been done *to* them than to what has been done *for* them."[32] Politicians use a number of techniques to avoid blame. Weaver identified eight of them, such as the following: *agenda limitation*, in which a politician tries to keep a particular blame-generating decision from being considered; *find a scapegoat*, which involves defecting blame onto others; *jump on the bandwagon*, deflecting blame by supporting a politically popular alternative, without drawing attention to the fact that it reflects a change in position. Kathleen McGraw, also a political scientist, further developed a taxonomy of blame management techniques, classifying them as either excuses or justifications.[33] She then tested the effectiveness of each strategy in terms of minimizing blame and maximizing credit.[34]

More recently, Christian Grose and colleagues conducted a study to examine how American senators respond to constituents who are in favor or against a particular roll call vote attributed to the senator.[35] Letters were sent to US senators that appeared to be from a constituent. In the letter, the "constituent" took a particular position on immigration (either pro or con). The researchers then examined the information in the response letters from the senators. They found evidence for a "strategic

explanation hypothesis" in which the senators typically responded to a constituent who agreed with a particular policy vote by reinforcing the agreement and to a constituent who disagreed by compensating for the vote. Thus, though the senators' responses were not dishonest, they managed disagreement by focusing on other actions they'd taken that were in accordance with the views of the constituent. Clearly, then, politicians are keenly aware of the need to manage disagreement in hopes of deflecting blame for unpopular actions.

Blame avoidance among politicians is not unique to the US and is likely to occur in any country in which politicians can be held accountable by citizens. One could see fear of blame as a good thing in that it might keep politicians from making risky decisions for fear of being blamed for a negative outcome by the public. On the other hand, Weaver argues that fear of blame can also place undesirable limitations on politicians. Sometimes the best policy decisions might carry with them a high potential of blame for failure. If politicians are so blame-averse that they refuse to consider such options, their choices are thus restricted. They may even fail to enact policies that they strongly believe are ethically and morally correct. For example, there is evidence that Obama's failure to close the notorious Guantanamo Bay prison, an oft-repeated campaign promise, was driven partially by the fear of being blamed for failing to protect the country from terrorists, even though many in the prison were likely innocent.[36]

Regardless of whether fear of blame on the part of politicians has a positive or a negative effect on politics, it behooves citizens to be mindful of the blame management techniques used by their leaders. Some leaders are more willing to take responsibility for decisions. Harry Truman made famous the phrase "the buck stops here," suggesting that the president is ultimately responsible for his decisions. He even had a sign with the phrase on his desk. Other leaders have been less willing to take responsibility for failures. As we will consider in Chap. 6, there is evidence to suggest that Donald Trump was particularly adept at shifting blame for the country's problems away from himself and his administration. In fact, one of the hallmarks of his campaign for the presidency was strategically placing blame for the country's problems in a way that appealed to a particular segment of the American population.

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3

Issues of Sexuality

Ambivalence About Abortion

It is hard to conceive of a more controversial issue than abortion in the US. Ever since the 1973 Supreme Court's *Roe V. Wade* decision legalizing abortion in all 50 states, there has been a continuous battle between Pro-Life activists, who wished to overturn or severely weaken the law, and Pro-Choice activists, who wished to keep abortion safe, legal, and readily available. In June of 2022, after a series of states had passed anti-abortion bills placing restrictions on when and under what circumstances abortion was permitted, the Supreme Court struck down *Roe V. Wade*. Now that abortion is no longer a protected right, at least ten states have banned the procedure entirely, and another four prohibit the procedure after six weeks of pregnancy, by which time most women do not even know they are pregnant.[1] More bans are likely on the way as Pro-Life advocates see an opportunity to further limit the procedure. Obviously, almost 50 years since the decision, strong feelings on abortion have not waned.

Perhaps it is not surprising that the debate is so emotionally charged, given that it touches upon beliefs about religion, sexuality, gender roles, and the very meaning of life. As pointed out by sociologist Kristen Luker

G. Sahar, *Blame and Political Attitudes*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-20236-0_3

some time ago, there seem to be drastically different ideologies underlying attitudes toward abortion, at least for those most involved in the debate: Pro-Choice and Pro-Life activists.[2]

Based upon her extensive interviews with individuals in both camps, Luker characterized them as completely at odds on a number of dimensions. The Pro-Choice activists in her sample believe that equality of opportunity for women, an important goal, can only be achieved by giving women the ability to control their own reproduction. Because most Pro-Choice Americans are secular, they are less likely to be bound by religious doctrine forbidding the procedure. They see sex as a fun and healthy way of showing affection for another person, not necessarily a sacred act aimed at conceiving a child. The Pro-Lifers, on the other hand, tend to endorse traditional gender roles and thus see raising children as a woman's most important (and natural) task. They generally believe it is morally wrong to intervene in God's plan by artificially preventing or terminating a pregnancy. They see sex as sacred and mainly for the purpose of procreation.

Reading even these brief descriptions outlining but a few of the many differences in their worldviews, we might be tempted to say, end of story—no further explanation for the fervent disagreement is needed. But that conclusion would ignore the fact that most Americans are not Pro-Life or Pro-Choice activists. In fact, most Americans do not take these polarized positions at all but rather are ambivalent about the issue.

Year after year, the large surveys of social attitudes demonstrate that the majority of Americans believe that abortion should be allowed in some but not all circumstances. For example, the 2019 Gallup Poll results showed that 53% of Americans believed abortion should be allowed in "certain circumstances." Only 21% thought it should be illegal in all circumstances, and 25% felt it should be legal in any circumstances.[3] Therefore, most do not take a purely ideological position on the issue; most are not entirely Pro-Life or Pro-Choice but rather vary their support based on the reason. One could say they take more of an "it depends" position on the morality of abortion.

So, for example, most Americans do approve of abortion in the case of rape, whereas many fewer approve because the woman does not want any more children. Why would the approval rates vary so much? If indeed

abortion is a moral issue, shouldn't it either be right or wrong in all cases? There are a few possible answers to these questions. For example, it is conceivable that people weigh various types of harm and choose the option considered to cause the least overall harm (to the woman and the fetus). However, it also appears that part of the reason abortion is generally approved of in the case of rape has to do with perceptions of responsibility for the unwanted pregnancy. To put it bluntly, a woman who is pregnant due to rape cannot be blamed for the pregnancy.

The role of blame in views on abortion occurred to me a number of years ago while watching a program on TV about whether or not Pro-Choice and Pro-Life individuals could find any common ground. As the two women, one from each camp, were interviewed, they each cited examples of a woman seeking an abortion. Interestingly, the Pro-Choice interviewee talked about a rape victim, and the Pro-Life representative mentioned a woman who uses abortion as birth control. As I listened, it became clear to me that part of the difference in their viewpoints was based on the typical case or stereotype of the sort of person who is usually seeking an abortion. The Pro-Choice individual imagined a woman who'd been through a traumatic rape and was thus innocent. The Pro-Life individual imagined a presumably promiscuous woman who simply hadn't bothered to prevent the pregnancy. These typical cases stand in stark contrast to each other, and I began to wonder whether disparate beliefs about the cause of the unwanted pregnancy were partially responsible for people's varied responses to abortion.

In a series of studies, I tested this question.[4] Because there was little research available on the perceived causes of unwanted pregnancy, it was first necessary to identify the important causes. An initial study conducted with college-student participants produced a list of 11 distinct causes of unwanted pregnancy, ranging from low morals to sexual assault. These causes were then categorized into types using data from another group of college students. The causes are listed in Fig. 3.1. Finally, a series of questions was posed in regard to each cause, asking participants (both college students and non-student adults) to rate how controllable it was by the pregnant woman, how responsible they perceived her to be, how much they blamed her, as well as emotional reactions such as sympathy and anger. Participants also indicated whether abortion should be allowed

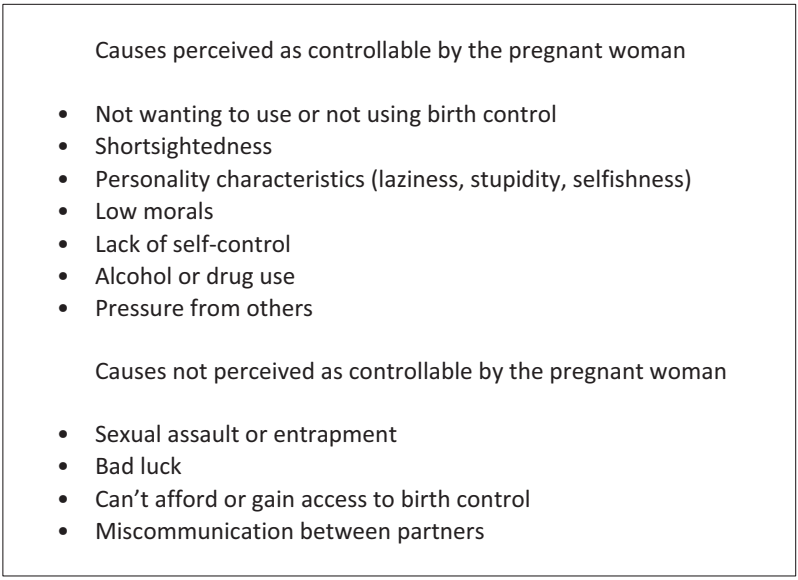

Fig. 3.1 The 11 causes of unwanted pregnancy divided by type. (From Zucker, G.S. (nee Sahar) (1999). Attributional and symbolic predictors of abortion attitudes. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 29*, 1218–1256)

in each case, whether they would be willing to provide personal help to the woman, and the degree to which they would endorse using government funding to help pay for the procedure.

The results of these studies provided evidence that Americans' attitudes toward abortion are indeed related to their blame of the pregnant woman. Participants categorized the causes such that the uncontrollable ones (e.g., sexual assault; can't afford or gain access to birth control) were viewed differently from the controllable ones (e.g., shortsightedness; alcohol or drug use). A woman pregnant due to a controllable cause elicited more blame and anger and less sympathy from participants. Finally, abortion approval as well as both personal and government help were significantly lower for the controllable than for the uncontrollable causes.

The attributional model linking perceived cause to blame, emotion, and attitude thus held up very well in regard to abortion attitudes. It seems clear that, for many Americans, abortion is not endorsed when the

pregnant women is held responsible or blamed for her situation. When she is not blamed, on the other hand, abortion is more likely to be seen as appropriate.

This series of studies gives credence to the idea suggested by legal scholar Lawrence Tribe that pregnancy and childbirth are perceived by many Americans as just punishment of women for engaging in consensual sex and that rape is treated differently because of the nonconsensual nature of the act.[5] The findings just described, however, indicate that a slightly more nuanced approach is in order. The important factor is not just whether the sex was consensual but whether the woman is held responsible for the *cause* of the pregnancy; specifically, she is blamed and punished (by withholding abortion and help) if she could have prevented it. Another American saying comes to mind here: "You play, you pay."

I was also interested in how ideologies or worldviews of participants were related to the model. Specifically, I was curious about whether the pattern we discovered in regard to poverty and welfare, that the effect of worldview on attitude is partially due to differing perceptions of blame, would emerge for unwanted pregnancy and abortion as well. Scales measuring religiosity and views on morality[6] were administered. We again utilized a statistical technique to evaluate the links between all of the variables, both direct links and those that are mediated by other variables. This analysis indicated that these ideological variables were related to perceptions of unwanted pregnancy and abortion in two ways. First, as one would expect, the more religious and morally traditional a person was, the less he or she approved of abortion in general. Given that Catholic and Fundamentalist Christian religious leaders in the US frequently speak against abortion, it is not surprising that religious individuals would be more opposed. More interesting for our purposes however was the finding that *being more religious and morally traditional was associated with more blame of the pregnant woman*. Note the parallels with political conservatism and welfare—the pattern is the same (Fig. 3.2).

It was exciting to find that the pattern we observed in regard to welfare held up with a very different issue. Blame was a critical piece of the puzzle for abortion as well. However, because abortion is viewed very differently across cultures, I began to wonder whether these findings in regard to ideology and blame of the pregnant woman are unique to the US. Whereas

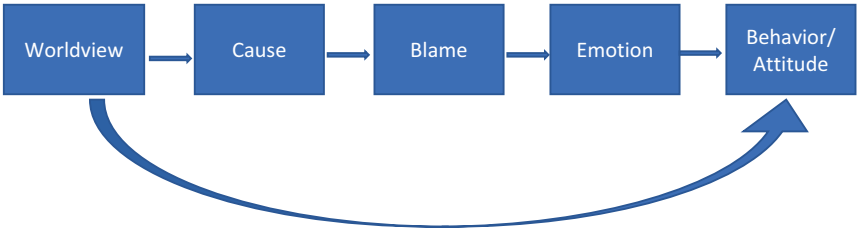

Fig. 3.2 Full attributional model with worldview and attitude

abortion is highly controversial in the US, it is not terribly divisive in other countries, such as Japan. Along with a Japanese colleague, Kaori Karasawa, I investigated whether the model developed in the US linking worldview to blame to emotions to abortion attitudes would hold up in Japan.[7] Why Japan? This comparison was a good one for a number of reasons. The US and Japan are both modern, industrialized nations with relatively high rates of abortion. However, the political context in regard to abortion is very different. The procedure has been highly controversial in the US since it was legalized in 1973. In contrast, abortion has been legal in Japan since 1948, is essentially unrestricted, and has generated relatively little controversy in its 70-year history.

It may be difficult for Americans to imagine abortion being uncontroversial. Given its link to views about gender equality, religion, sexuality, how could it NOT produce passionate debate? The answer to that question appears to be that abortion is not strongly linked to those views in Japan. Rather than the right to abortion having been gained through a legal battle, it was handed down by the government. It is therefore not associated with feminist activists as it is in the US. In the words of one researcher, Samuel Coleman, "The use of women's rights as an ideological justification for induced abortion is conspicuously absent in Japan."[8] Beyond that, although abortion is generally viewed negatively by Buddhist leaders, they do not become involved in political debates to the extent that religious figures do in the US. Rather than trying to influence political policy, they tend to take a more pragmatic stance, accommodating their practices to the political policies that do exist.[9] These many interesting cross-cultural differences in regard to abortion make a Japan-US comparison highly informative.

As we had hoped, the results of this study produced some interesting findings. Most importantly, the tendency of our college-student participants to use blame of the pregnant woman as a deciding factor in whether to allow abortion was just as strong—in fact even stronger—in Japan than in the US. That is, Japanese college students were more approving of abortion when the pregnant woman was not held responsible for the pregnancy than when she was held responsible. Not surprisingly, this finding was also replicated for the American college students. In both groups, the attributional model linking controllability, responsibility, and blame to emotions of sympathy and anger to abortion attitudes was supported. In both the US and Japan, when confronted with a scenario of a woman with an unwanted pregnancy who wants an abortion, we consider the cause. If she had control over the cause of the pregnancy (e.g., she was promiscuous or shortsighted), we hold her responsible, blame her, and tend to feel little sympathy and some anger, and we do not endorse abortion. If, on the other hand, she did not have control over the cause (e.g., she was sexually assaulted or her birth control failed), we do not hold her responsible, nor do we blame her, we are more likely to feel sympathy than anger, and we will be more approving of abortion.

But of course, there were also differences. The most important disparities between the two samples related to the worldview variables. Once again, we measured the ideologies of our participants. Specifically, we assessed the degree to which they held absolute moral values, endorsed family values, believed in gender equality, considered themselves religious, and identified themselves as politically conservative. It turned out that these variables were more weakly related to abortion attitudes in Japan than in the US. In addition, these worldviews were not as strongly associated with blame of the pregnant woman in Japan as they were in the US.

What conclusions can we draw from this cross-cultural comparison? First, it is important to note that in both the US and Japan the more one blames the pregnant woman for her pregnancy, the less one approves of abortion. This is the one finding that held up solidly in both cultures, supporting the idea that blame is of central importance. Second, it appears that ideology might only matter if politicians and religious leaders connect particular value systems to an issue. Specifically, in the US a

person who is more politically conservative, morally traditional, and more favorable toward traditional gender-role attitudes is more likely to blame the pregnant woman and less likely to approve of abortion. These worldviews are much less relevant to blame and abortion attitudes in Japan. Because Americans, both social scientists and laypeople alike, have long associated abortion with value systems (religiosity, political ideology, moral views, and gender-role attitudes), this finding may seem quite surprising. It highlights the important role played by politicians and religious figures in linking particular policies with value systems in a given society. When these value systems are not activated by a particular political symbol or term, then they do not come into play. And when values are not strongly linked to a policy, blame becomes an even stronger determinant of attitude.

If this study was a test of the importance of blame of the pregnant woman versus worldview in determining abortion attitudes in the two cultures, one could say that blame won. Unfortunately, because the political discourse in the US on abortion has focused on the most extreme Pro-Life and Pro-Choice positions, the role of worldview has been exaggerated, and contextual influences like the cause of the pregnancy and blame of the pregnant woman, have been ignored.

Perhaps because of this tendency to exaggerate the degree to which abortion is a "values issue" largely determined by one's ideology, politicians are actually out of step with the beliefs of the majority of Americans. Thus, we have extreme laws put in place by legislators, such as Alabama banning abortion (prior to the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*) even in the case of rape and incest though most Americans (and four out of five Alabamans) were opposed.[10] Americans are not purely ideological about abortion; they are also pragmatic. This fact seems to be lost on the conservative legislators of Alabama and many others throughout the country.

To the surprise of many, the conservative state of Kansas just voted down an amendment that would have removed the protection of the right to abortion in the state constitution by a substantial majority. The results have spurred a great deal of discussion about whether Republicans will suffer a backlash against the overturning of *Roe* due to the fact that most Americans do not take an extreme Pro-Life position.[11] Time will tell.

A controversy a few years ago at one of the most important abortion providers and Pro-Choice organizations, Planned Parenthood, suggests that conservatives aren't the only ones out of step with most Americans. Leana Wen, a medical doctor and former president of the organization, stepped down from her position in July 2019 due to philosophical differences with the board. In a surprising op-ed to the *New York Times*,[12] Wen described these differences as largely a result of her desire to treat abortion as a health care issue versus the board's wish to treat it as a primarily political one. Obviously, abortion is both. However, she emphasized that this politicization resulted in a refusal to engage with anyone who was not solidly Pro-Choice. Wen writes:

> Perhaps the greatest area of tension was over our work to be inclusive of those with nuanced views about abortion. I reached out to people who wrestle with abortion's moral complexities, but who will speak out against government interference in personal medical decisions. I engaged those who identify as being pro-life, but who support safe, legal abortion access because they don't want women to die from back-alley abortions. I even worked with people who oppose abortion but support Planned Parenthood because of the preventive services we provide—we share the desire to reduce the need for abortion through sex education and birth control.

A strategy of excluding those who are ambivalent about abortion unfortunately means throwing away the support of a large portion of the population. With activists on both sides of the issue taking such hardline approaches, it is not surprising that abortion continues to be polarizing, even though most Americans take a position closer to the middle than the poles.

Were You Born Gay?

Those of us born before the 1990s probably cannot think of an attitude that has shifted as drastically in our lifetimes as the view of homosexuality. In the early 1950s, homosexuality was listed as a mental illness in the American Psychiatric Association's diagnostic manual. At that time, discrimination based on sexual orientation was not prohibited, sexual

contact between same-sex individuals was a criminal offense, and homosexuals were banned from working for the federal government. Fast forward to 2004: the first legal same-sex marriage took place in Massachusetts. This is not to underestimate the many obstacles that confronted the gay and lesbian rights movement. Every victory was hard won, and there is still much progress to be made toward true equality. Nonetheless, it is hard not to be amazed by the progress Americans have made on this issue.

The stigma associated with being homosexual when I was in high school in the late 1970s seemed nearly gone when my own daughter was in high school 30 years later. While my gay friends had been closeted, hers openly dated and were accepted as no different from straight couples. Not surprisingly, beliefs about gay and lesbian rights have changed dramatically as well. A 2015 Pew Research Poll reported that a 57% majority of Americans support same-sex marriage and 39% oppose.[13] Only five years earlier, Pew reported that 42% supported and 48% opposed. That's pretty rapid change.

Of course, it would not be correct to say that Americans have become members of one big happy family on this issue. There remain sharp divisions based on gender, age, race, political party, and religious beliefs. Given the importance of worldview variables like politics and religion, it is perhaps not surprising that, like abortion, gay and lesbian rights have been treated as a values issue, especially by Republicans. Though most Americans do not view it as a critical issue facing the country,[14] the topic of same-sex marriage came up repeatedly during the campaigns of Republican presidential hopefuls in 2012 and again in 2016. They seemed to have been competing for who could take a harder line against gay and lesbian rights, assuming that position would appeal to Americans with traditional values. But is it really a values issue? Are we divided mostly because of worldviews like political ideology and religion?

Consider the following exchange about homosexuality between CNN talk show host Piers Morgan and candidate for the 2012 Republican nomination Herman Cain:

> Cain: I think it's a sin because of my biblical beliefs and, although people don't agree with me, I happen to think that it is a personal choice.
> Morgan: You believe that?

Cain: I believe that.
Morgan: You think people wait—you believe people get to a certain age and say, I want to be homosexual?
Cain: Let me turn it around to you. What does science show? Show me evidence other than opinion and you might cause me to reconsider that... Where is the evidence?
Morgan: You're a commonsense guy. You genuinely believe that millions of Americans wake up in their late teens normally and go, you know what, I kind of fancy being a homosexual? You don't believe that, do you?
Cain: Piers, you haven't given me any evidence to believe otherwise.
Morgan: My gut instinct, Herman, tells me that it has to be a natural thing.
Cain: So it's your gut instinct versus my gut instincts. I respect their right to make that choice. You don't see me bashing them. I respect them to have the right to make that choice. I don't have to agree with it. That's all I'm saying
Morgan: It would be like a gay person saying, Herman, you made a choice to be black.
Cain: You know that's not the case. You know I was born black.
Morgan: Maybe if they say that, they would find that offensive.
Cain: Piers, Piers. This doesn't wash off. I hate to burst your bubble.
Morgan: I don't think being homosexual washes off.[15]

The Morgan-Cain exchange above does have a "values" component in that Cain states that he believes homosexuality is a sin. However, the remainder of the dialogue has to do with the *cause* of homosexuality not with moral values. Morgan thinks it is something a person is born with, presumably due to a genetic predisposition, whereas Cain argues that sexual orientation is a choice.

Two presidential elections later, in 2019, politicians were having similar exchanges. Pete Buttigieg, an openly gay candidate for the Democratic nomination, addressed Vice President Mike Pence, a known opponent of gay rights, in the following way:

> If me being gay was a choice, it was a choice that was made far, far above my pay grade. And that's the thing I wish the Mike Pences of the world would understand—that if you've got a problem with who I am, your problem is not with me. Your quarrel, sir, is with my creator.[16]

Buttigieg's clever statement simultaneously reinforces the idea that he is a Christian who believes that God is his creator while challenging the assumption of people like Pence, that homosexuality is a choice.

The position of Cain and Pence is echoed by Dr. James Dobson, influential evangelical Christian advocate of traditional family values and a founder of Focus on the Family, who said: "Despite all the shouting to the contrary, no credible scientific research has substantiated that homosexuality is genetic or innate."[17] He also mentions "active recruitment to the lifestyle" as though people are recruited by individuals in the gay community, an idea that no doubt sends shivers down the spines of his followers.

This discourse fits with a phenomenon that cognitive linguist George Lakoff pointed out:

> Conservatives do not talk much about the increasing evidence that homosexuality has a genetic basis. Gays speak of "discovering" that they are gay, rather than "choosing" to be gay. Conservatives, however, speak of the gay "lifestyle," as though being gay were simply a conscious choice of a particular way of life. If there is no choice about being gay, if one is born gay or bisexual or heterosexual, then the force is taken away from the idea of homosexuality as an immoral choice of "lifestyle." Indeed, if free will is taken away, if there is no choice, then it is much harder to make homosexuality a moral issue.[18]

The implication is that even if a person views homosexuality as a negative thing (as do Cain, Pence, and Dobson), he cannot blame someone for being homosexual and therefore punish him or her if the cause of sexual orientation is uncontrollable by the gay or lesbian individual. There is then no justification for denying the person equal rights. I should note that I have some discomfort in using the term "blame" in regard to homosexuality as I do not see it as a social problem, though, as I just mentioned, those advocating against same-sex equality surely do see it as such. In the remainder of this section, I will use language more akin to causal controllability or choice rather than blame.

Interestingly, one of the ways in which Americans have shifted their beliefs about homosexuality is in regard to its cause. According to the

same 2015 Pew poll, nearly half the respondents (47%) believed that a person was "born gay," with 40% believing it is a choice and 7% attributing it to upbringing. As recently as 2013, 6% fewer respondents believed homosexuality is something with which one is born. Again, this is a dramatic shift in only a couple of years and an extremely important one in regard to attitudes toward gay rights.

Indeed, the data from a number of studies show that those who believe that homosexuality is biologically determined are more likely to support gay rights. *In fact, recent studies suggest not only that causal beliefs about homosexuality have an important influence on attitudes toward gay and lesbian rights but that they are more powerful factors than either political ideology or religiosity*. Sociologist C. E. Tygert, for example, measured political ideology and religiosity as well as the degree to which respondents believed that homosexuality was caused by genes, and assessed how well these values and beliefs predicted one's stand on domestic partnerships and gay marriages. Though liberals and the less traditionally religious were more supportive of these rights, *the strongest predictor of support for gay rights was a belief that sexual orientation is genetically determined*.[19]

Thus, though values, as represented by political ideology and religion, are related to support for gay rights, it turns out that they are only a piece of the puzzle. Beliefs about the causes of homosexuality contribute still more. In a study that more fully tested an attributional model of attitudes toward gay rights, political scientists Donald Haider-Markel and Mark Joslyn also found that religion and ideology were strong predictors of beliefs about the morality of homosexuality and attitudes toward gay rights. This finding is not surprising given how strongly political and religious leaders have linked the issue to value systems. In addition, they documented that politically conservative and religious individuals prefer environmental attributions for homosexuality, whereas liberals and the less religious tend to endorse biological explanations. Most importantly, however, they reported that *attributions for homosexuality were far more powerful determinants of attitudes toward gay rights than any other variable*, including those values variables (ideology and religion) that are usually the focus of such studies.[20]

Haider-Markel and Joslyn make an interesting observation in regard to political ideology and biological determinism. As will be considered in a

later chapter, conservatives some time ago tended to endorse biological attributions for racial inequality. That is, they were more likely to believe that differences in the economic status of Blacks and whites were due to inherent inferiority of Blacks rather than due to environmental factors (access to education, discrimination, etc.), as believed by liberals. This biological attribution fit well with the conservative preference for keeping the existing system in place; to suggest the system was the cause of the inequality would justify governmental intervention to address it. Conversely, in the case of gay rights, an environmental attribution for homosexuality better justifies the current system, one that discriminates against gay and lesbian individuals, making that attribution more attractive to conservatives. Thus, it appears that political ideology does not necessary predispose one to consistently endorse biological or environmental attributions. The relation between worldview and causal beliefs is more complicated than that, as will become evident in the chapters that follow.

Also complicating the relations between worldview, causal beliefs about homosexuality, and attitudes toward gay rights is another variable that is likely in the mix: prejudice. Clearly, there is a long history of homophobia in the US, as in many other countries. How does that factor into the attributional model? Some recent research suggests that prejudiced individuals can use causal attributions as justifications for the expression of prejudice. Psychologists Christian Crandall and Amy Eshleman developed a model of prejudice to explain how individuals attempt to reconcile the experience of prejudice with the normative prohibition on expressing prejudice.[21] That is, one might feel animosity toward a particular group but be unable to express that negative feeling for fear of violating social norms. They propose that causal attributions can be mechanisms for justifying the expression of prejudice. Thus, for example, if a person is prejudiced against gay men and lesbians, she might endorse causes of homosexuality that are under their control. Indeed, a study by Peter Hegarty and Anne Golden found evidence supporting this model.[22] Individuals who held prejudices toward a variety of stigmatized groups (including homosexuals) spontaneously produced more controllable causes for the stigma than nonprejudiced people. The link between prejudice and causal judgments will be returned to in Chap. 5 on racial inequality.

To summarize the findings in regard to attitudes toward abortion and gay rights, two very different issues related to sexuality, it appears that the narrow focus on worldview or values has been misguided. Imagine a person were to be picked at random, and you are asked to predict that person's position on either of these issues. You are allowed to ask him or her one question to help you. Based on the information you've received through the media, you would probably ask the person how religious they are, whether they are liberal or conservative, or what political party they belong to. In fact, you would stand a much better chance of successfully predicting their position by asking, "What is the cause?"

She Was Asking for It

It is not an exaggeration to say that the topics of sexual assault and sexual harassment exploded into the media in 2017. As one prominent figure after another was revealed to have serially assaulted or harassed women (and an occasional man), the American public has reacted in a variety of ways, from shock, horror, and anger to skepticism and concern about possible unfair or untrue allegations. The #MeToo movement, which actually began in 2006, was reignited in an attempt to demonstrate just how prevalent assault and harassment are in hopes of waking society up to the seriousness of the problem. However, in all of this coverage, one does not hear much about the extensive research on reactions to assault and harassment. These psychological studies have examined numerous factors that influence people's responses to assault and shed light on why the public's reaction has been so mixed.

A major focus of these studies has been attribution of blame to the perpetrator and victim. Investigations of the general public's reactions to rape indicate that attributions of blame of the victim and the perpetrator fluctuate based on the circumstances of the situation, characteristics of the alleged perpetrator and victim, characteristics of the perceiver, and cultural context. There is evidence to suggest that although blame is likely to be assigned to the perpetrator in the clearest cases of stranger rape, many individuals increasingly attribute blame to the victim as the circumstances become more ambiguous, such as in cases of acquaintance

rape, especially if alcohol was a factor, and marital rape. A similar pattern emerges in regard to sexual harassment.

There are a couple of likely reasons why there is so much social science research on blame for sexual assault. First, it is an extremely common crime, with most studies indicating that about 1 in 5 women will be assaulted in their lifetime and about 1 in 71 men. Because the vast majority of cases include a male perpetrator and a female victim, we will focus on that situation, though, of course, without intending to minimize the significance of assault against men. Sexual assault is underreported, so these are likely to be conservative estimates. In addition, sexual assault is unique among interpersonal crimes in that there is a much higher tendency to blame the victim of the assault. We do not hear much about these careless people who get mugged or robbed because they behaved badly, but we seem to hear a lot of critiques of the behavior of rape victims. In addition, because of the trauma victims experience as a result of such responses, many are hesitant to report the crime. If they do, they are harmed secondarily by the reactions of others. We'll consider some of the factors that influence blame of the victim and the perpetrator for sexual assault and some of the theories about why victim-blaming is so common.

Most of this research asks participants to read scenarios describing an assault and respond to a series of questions about their reactions. A number of factors can be manipulated in the scenarios to examine their effects on blame. One of the most common situational factors concerns the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim. The general finding is that in cases of stranger rape, blame of the perpetrator is highest and blame of the victim is lowest. In a case of acquaintance rape (sometimes called date rape), the perpetrator is blamed somewhat less and the victim somewhat more. And finally, in marital rape situations, which incidentally some people do not consider a crime at all, blame of the perpetrator is lowest, and blame of the victim is highest.[23] Because there are hundreds of studies, I am generalizing here to provide the big picture. It should be noted that there are a lot of possible variations that could affect the findings. For example, acquaintance rape on a first date tends to be responded to differently than after months of dating. The more long term the relationship, the more the victim is blamed.

A second frequently examined situational factor is alcohol use, which is very common in actual assault situations, especially in acquaintance rape. Studies generally report that alcohol use on the part of the victim tends to increase her perceived blame, whereas consumption of alcohol by the perpetrator tends to reduce his perceived blame. In fact, there appears to be a linear relationship such that the more intoxicated the victim, the more she is blamed, and, conversely, the more intoxicated the perpetrator, the less he is blamed.[24] Apparently, people view alcohol consumption quite differently depending on the consumer. If a man consumes a lot of alcohol, he is seen as unable to control himself and therefore less at fault. If a woman does the same thing, she is seen as to blame, presumably because she should have been aware of the risk of being raped and therefore limited her drinking. It is also possible that because of the cultural assumption that alcohol use disinhibits sexuality, the woman is presumed to have wanted sex if she'd been drinking. It is an odd logic that the same variable improves our perceptions of some individuals and worsens our perceptions of others.

Because alcohol is so frequently a factor in acquaintance rapes, well-meaning college administrators emphasize the risks of heavy drinking, especially to their female students. But this position, that women should avoid alcohol to avoid getting raped, is controversial. Slate columnist Emily Yoffe published a piece entitled "*College women: Stop getting drunk*"[25] in which she called upon women to drink conservatively (no more than two drinks sipped slowly) to avoid being assaulted. She states:

> Let's be totally clear: Perpetrators are the ones responsible for committing their crimes, and they should be brought to justice. But we are failing to let women know that when they render themselves defenseless, terrible things can be done to them. Young women are getting a distorted message that their right to match men drink for drink is a feminist issue. The real feminist message should be that when you lose the ability to be responsible for yourself, you drastically increase the chances that you will attract the kinds of people who, shall we say, don't have your best interest at heart. That's not blaming the victim; that's trying to prevent more victims.

In response, Ann Friedman turned this argument on its head in *College men: Stop getting drunk*[26] to point out an alternative approach that places responsibility on men:

> Let's be totally clear: Perpetrators are the ones responsible for committing their crimes, and they should be brought to justice. But we are failing to let men know that when they drink their decision-making skills into oblivion, they can do terrible things. Young men are getting a distorted message that their right to match each other drink for drink is proof of their masculinity. The real masculine message should be that when you lose the ability to be responsible for yourself, you drastically increase the chances that you will become the kind of person who, shall we say, doesn't have others' best interests at heart. That's not saying all men are rapists; that's trying to prevent more rapes.

The New York Times followed up that same year in their series Room for Debate, which presented several experts' positions on whether it is appropriate to warn women against drinking rather than to shift the focus to men's behavior. Blame attribution in sexual assault is clearly a cultural flashpoint.

Another aspect of the situation that has been examined in a number of studies is the appearance and sexual history of the victim. The findings generally support the idea that women described as wearing more revealing clothing at the time of the assault are blamed more than those described as dressing conservatively.[27] Interestingly, one study manipulated the sexual objectification of the victim by showing a picture of her either in a bikini or wearing jeans and a white top. Note that the participants were told that these outfits were NOT what she was wearing at the time of the assault; rather, they were from her part-time modeling portfolio. Nonetheless, the participants attributed significantly more blame to the victim when they had seen the bikini picture. This held true for both male and female participants.[28] In addition, women portrayed as having a promiscuous sexual history are blamed more than those who are not. A recent study might explain this increased blame by other women. The research revealed that a woman who appears to present herself in a sexualized way is dehumanized (seen as possessing fewer unique human

traits) and therefore subjected to higher levels of aggression by other women.[29] Though the research was not about sexual assault, it does shed light on the derogation of women who are objectified or sexualized.

A final important situational predictor of blame of the victim is amount of physical resistance—the more the victim is described as having resisted, the less she is blamed. Relatedly, she is blamed less the more the perpetrator is represented as using strong physical force. Though other situational factors have been examined, those described here are the most strongly documented.[30]

Let's now consider characteristics, not of the victim, but of the perceiver. The effect of the gender of the perceiver has been examined in a large number of studies. Though the results are mixed, there is some evidence that men are likely to blame the victim of rape more than are women. Not all studies report this difference, though when a gender difference is found, it is always that men blame the victim more than do women.

Some research suggests that the reason not all studies reveal a gender difference is that one's gender is less important than one's attitudes. One particularly relevant attitude has been termed "Rape Myth Acceptance." Rape myths are common, though false, beliefs about rape that are prejudicial and harmful to women. They include myths like "she was asking for it" indicating that women want to be raped; the idea that women frequently lie about assault; the assumption that men cannot control their behavior after a certain point and therefore cannot be held responsible for rape, and so on. Not surprisingly, there is considerable evidence suggesting that the more a person endorses rape myths (as measured by a series of questions), the more that individual views rape victims as to blame. Men's higher levels of blaming victims might well stem from the fact that they are more likely to believe in these myths.[31]

A related belief system that is also associated with blame of victims is gender-role attitude. People who endorse traditional gender roles in which women should be restricted to taking on only stereotypically feminine roles are also more likely to blame victims. Some studies suggest that this belief system is more important than the perceiver's gender. That is, men who do not endorse traditional gender roles are no more likely to blame victims than are women.[32]

It has also been suggested that greater victim blaming on the part of men might stem from the fact that they are more likely to identify with the perpetrator in the scenario, whereas women are more likely to identify with the victim. Most studies only consider the male perpetrator-female victim situation. Further, there is evidence that one's perceived similarity to the victim decreases blame of the victim. The fact that women are more likely to perceive themselves as similar to her may also lower their victim-blaming relative to men's. [33]

It should be noted that male perpetrators are overall blamed more than victims. As pointed out in one of the studies, while there is general agreement that the perpetrator deserves a large share of the blame, there is much more variability in blame of the victim. That is, participants have a wide variety of responses in regard to her level of blame, perhaps reflecting different assumptions they are making about the victim.[34] Of course, assumptions about the perpetrator also have effects. Particularly relevant to high-profile cases, one recent study reported that assaults involving perpetrators who are highly successful are less likely to be labeled as rape and judged less harshly.[35]

So, we've established that people sometimes blame the victims of sexual assault and that the circumstances of the assault as well as victim and perceiver characteristics influence the level of blame. And obviously, it would be personally harmful to a victim to be blamed for her assault. But does the level of blame affect the victim in other more tangible ways? The answer is yes. Studies have shown that the more responsible a victim is perceived to be, the less credible she is deemed in the courtroom, and the less likely the perpetrator will be convicted.[36] Once again, blame has big effects. In addition, as was the case with blame for unwanted pregnancy, it partially exerts its effects through the emotion of sympathy. Kathryn Sperry and Jason Siegel utilized the full attributional model and found that blame decreased sympathy for the victim, which in turn decreased the victim's credibility and the observer's willingness to help her. Finally, those credibility and helping judgments influenced the verdict, such that the less credible and help-worthy the victim was found to be, the less likely the perpetrator would be found guilty.[37] Once again, blame sets off a chain of reactions, affecting our emotional response to a person, and the way we intend to behave toward her.

Reviewing these well-established findings of social science research, it is hard not to be struck by the possibility that people are looking for reasons to blame the victim. And because social interactions of all kinds are fairly complicated, it is not hard to find subtle cues that might justify holding the victim responsible. Why might people be motivated to blame the victim? One commonly endorsed theory about blaming rape victims was introduced earlier: Belief in a Just World. It is possible that the idea that an innocent person could be subject to sexual assault is so uncomfortable for us that we find ways to blame the victim to restore our belief that the world is a just place. After all, if I acknowledge that innocent women are raped on a regular basis (which all evidence suggests to be true), then I have to live with the anxiety-producing idea that the same fate could befall me through no fault of my own.

Of course, there is also the possibility that blame of rape victims is politically motivated, at least in part. As discussed in the first section of this chapter, rape is considered by most Americans to be a justifiable reason for an abortion. Many find the idea of forcing a rape victim to give birth to her attacker's baby to be repugnant. Thus, rape presents a problematic case for Pro-Life individuals. There are two ways of solving this problem: one is to convince people that most rapes are not truly rapes (in the sense that they were desired by the victim); another is to persuade them that rape does not lead to pregnancy. Todd Akin, Republican Representative of Missouri, attempted to achieve both at once in his unforgettable comments in 2012 in response to a question about whether abortion is justified in the case of rape. He remarked, "*It seems to be, first of all, from what I understand from doctors, it's really rare. If it's a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try to shut the whole thing down.*"[38] Not surprisingly, many Americans were outraged both by the suggestion that some rapes were not "legitimate" and that rape rarely results in pregnancy.

The findings of studies of sexual harassment mirror those of sexual assault. In general, the lion's share of the blame for harassment goes to the perpetrator in clear and blatant cases, but perceptions are more varied as the situation becomes more ambiguous. In those more ambiguous situations, men are less likely to perceive the event as an example of harassment than are women. In addition, a number of researchers report a tendency for men and individuals with traditional gender-role attitudes

to blame the victim more than do women and those with non-traditional attitudes. Why might traditional gender-role attitudes predispose a person to blame victims of both rape and sexual harassment? The System Justification Theory discussed in the introduction provides a possible answer. Those who prefer that women stick to traditional roles probably do so because they liked the system as it was before the advances for women made by feminism. If the system is working for me, why would I want to change it? If I suggest that women are to blame for harassment because they are bringing it on themselves, then nothing about the culture of the workplace has to change. Those doing well in a system do not tend to want to shake it up.

Consider the following reported by CNN in 2017 following the sexual harassment and assault charges against Hollywood movie mogul Harvey Weinstein and other high-profile men:

> Renowned actress Angela Lansbury is facing criticism after saying women "must sometimes take blame" for sexual harassment because of the way they dress.
>
> In an interview Monday with British entertainment media company RadioTimes, Lansbury said women "have gone out of their way to make themselves attractive. And unfortunately it has backfired on us ... Although it's awful to say we can't make ourselves look as attractive as possible without being knocked down and raped."[39]

Though it is tempting to view this as the outdated and ill-informed musings of a woman in her 1990s, these victim-blaming statements are frequently echoed by others. Similar remarks were made by fashion designer Donna Karan at the age of 69, who suggested that women were "asking for it" by presenting themselves sexually, and actress Mayim Bialik, who at the age of 41 wrote an op-ed in the *New York Times* endorsing dressing modestly and not acting flirtatiously.

The irony of course is that it is well known that being physically attractive is nearly essential to landing acting jobs.[40] So, women cannot succeed in an occupation without looking attractive, yet their attractiveness is blamed for their harassment and sexual assault.

We began this discussion of sexual assault and harassment by considering the mixed responses on the part of the public to the series of high-profile cases brought against public figures. My hope is that a look into the research on these topics has helped the reader understand those responses. These cases have been described in the media in ways that suggest some ambiguity about the situation, and all were acquaintance rather than stranger assaults, which opens the door to victim-blaming. From that opening, all kinds of motivations kick in for those likely to blame the victim: the general tendency to blame victims to restore our belief in a just world or to justify the current system; the particularly strong victim-blaming tendencies on the part of those who believe in rape myths and traditional gender roles; the tendency to avoid blaming successful perpetrators; the proclivity to blame women who have been sexualized or objectified, which was the case for most of the victims such as the many actresses that have come forward. On the other hand, a different set of factors motivate those less likely to blame the victim: a belief that the world is not just and that the system is flawed, a rejection of traditional gender roles and rape myths, a rejection of the objectification of women, a feeling of similarity to and empathy for the victim, and so on. It is no wonder that the public's views have been so varied and so passionately held.

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4

Racial Issues

The Paradox of Contemporary Racial Attitudes

A popular view of progress toward racial equality in the US characterizes it as a relatively continuous movement from gross inequality during slavery to partial equality after the civil rights movement to full (or nearly full) equality in the modern era. In fact, upon the election of the first Black president, Barack Obama, some Americans declared the US to be "postracial," a country in which racism had essentially ceased to exist. Consider an article by John McWhorter, Columbia University linguist and frequent commentator on race issues, entitled "Racism in America is over."[1] McWhorter allowed that there were still a few racists around, but he suggested that racism was no longer a major problem:

> Of course, nothing magically changed when Obama was declared president-elect. However, our proper concern is not whether racism still exists, but whether it remains a serious problem. The election of Obama proved, as nothing else could have, that it no longer does.

Unfortunately, whether you believe that racism is a thing of the past or not, there remains an uncomfortable truth: there is still prevalent

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inequality across races in many essential measures of quality of life. Infant mortality in Black babies is double the rate of white babies.[2] The median net worth of Black households in 2019 was $24,100 compared with $188,200 for white families.[3] Black Americans are more likely to live in poverty and be unemployed, less likely to have health insurance, and more likely to be incarcerated and shot by police. So, if racism is over but stark disparities in nearly all aspects of life remain, how can they be explained? The way Americans answer that question has been the focus of much of contemporary social science research on the topic of race, and those studies have revealed that Americans differ in how they place blame for these inequalities. Some see the legacy of slavery and systemic racism as continuing to have strong negative effects on the opportunities and experiences of Black people; others attribute the problem to Blacks themselves. By now, this pattern of placing blame on the individual versus the system is probably sounding pretty familiar. As we will shortly consider, the actual aspect of Black people that is blamed has shifted, but many Americans continue to believe that the problem is the individual, not the system. That is how a nation with gross racial inequity can be considered postracial; its citizens must attribute the inequity to something other than racism.

In his book entitled *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America,* historian Ibram X. Kendi[4] suggests that these different approaches to explaining racial disparities have been around since before the US was officially a country. Kendi argues that the history of racism in the US is not characterized by continuous progress as Americans have gradually become enlightened but rather that there has been, from the beginning, a tension between three different approaches to explaining inequality. *Segregationists* blame Black people themselves for their less prosperous outcomes. *Antiracists* blame racial discrimination. *Assimilationists* blame both in combination. In the prologue of the book, he states:

> For nearly six centuries, antiracist ideas have been pitted against *two* kinds of racist ideas: segregationist and assimilationist. The history of racial ideas that follows is the history of these three distinct voices—segregationists, assimilationists, and antiracists—and how they each have rationalized racial disparities, arguing why whites have remained on the living and winning end, while Blacks remained on the losing and dying end.[5]

This historical analysis of the history of racist ideas fits remarkably well with social science research on racial inequality. The road to equality from a psychological perspective has indeed not been marked by constant progress as racist ideas gradually fall away. Rather, it has been characterized by movement forward toward equality, often followed by movement backward, in large part because of disagreements about who is to blame for racial disparities.

Some years ago, social scientists identified a paradox in contemporary racial attitudes among white Americans. Though traditional racism (e.g., viewing Blacks as biologically inferior to whites) has declined, and large numbers of Americans endorse the principle of racial equality, there is relatively little support for policies aimed at reducing inequity (e.g., Affirmative Action). Why would a society that has largely come to value equality fail to support such policies? Study and after study suggest that it's because many white Americans hold Black Americans responsible (blame them) for their plight.[6]

If Only They'd Try Harder, We Wouldn't Need Affirmative Action

Much like the studies of beliefs about poverty, the research tends to identify two general types of perceived causes of racial inequality: individualistic, which blame inequality on Blacks themselves, and structural, which blame societal forces such as discrimination and lack of access to education. The individualistic causes have been further distinguished into two types: traditional individualistic causes emphasize perceived innate inferiority of Blacks, and motivational individualistic, which blame lack of effort on the part of Blacks (i.e., Blacks are not trying hard enough to succeed).[7] Not surprisingly, there has been a shift in white attitudes over time from endorsing the traditional to the motivational explanations. Questions about the causes of racial inequality have been asked in major national surveys for several decades now. Several excellent summaries of those patterns reveal changes over time but also some consistency. One extensive analysis by Harvard sociologist Lawrence Bobo and colleagues[8] indicated that most white Americans recognize that Black Americans are

economically disadvantaged compared to whites. Therefore, whites are not oblivious to the fact of socioeconomic inequality. However, the researchers note that in the time period they examined (1977–2008), lack of "motivation or willpower" was consistently the most highly endorsed explanation for the inequality by whites. Polls further indicate that Black Americans have consistently viewed discrimination as a major cause much more than whites.[9] Interestingly, a Gallup poll assessing perceptions of who was most to blame for Blacks' disadvantage documented that whites endorsed the idea that whites were partially to blame in 1963, but from 1968 forward, they laid the blame almost exclusively on Black Americans themselves.[10] It seems that as soon as the civil rights movement had dismantled the structures of Jim Crow racism, many white Americans came to believe that racial barriers had been removed, and Black Americans simply needed to work harder.

Most political psychologists would thus tend to disagree with the position that racism is no longer a significant problem in the US. They have concentrated their efforts on trying to understand what contemporary racism is, specifically how it differs from old fashioned racism. While it is encouraging that most white Americans no longer believe in the genetic inferiority of Blacks, and virulent in-your-face racism is less frequently expressed than it used to be, it is clear that many whites continue to hold negative attitudes toward Black Americans.

One important theory that aims to explain the current form of racism, which does not rely on the idea of innate inferiority, is termed "modern or symbolic racism."[11] This theory, developed by UCLA political psychologist David Sears and colleagues, posits that racism is not dead but rather that it has transformed into a more subtle and socially acceptable form. The researchers suggest that symbolic racism is a blend of anti-Black feelings and the endorsement of nonracial traditional American values, such as the Protestant work ethic, individualism, and so on. Thus, they argue that symbolic racism is driven by this combination of negative affect paired with the perception that Blacks violate traditional values.

Scales to measure individual differences in symbolic racism were developed and found to be positively correlated with opposition to policies aimed at increasing racial equity (such as affirmative action and reparations for historical wrongs).[12] That is, the higher one's score on the scale, the less likely to endorse racial policies to reduce inequity.

In its most recent revised form, symbolic racism is characterized by four themes: that (1) racial discrimination is no longer a serious barrier to the success of Black Americans; (2) the main reason Blacks have not raised their standard of living is because they do not work hard enough; and thus (3) their continuing demands for equality are not warranted; and (4) Blacks are getting undeserved special favors.[13] There is now considerable evidence supporting the theory that individuals who endorse these themes tend to oppose policies that would address racial inequality.

However, there have been some criticisms of the theory and the scale on a few different grounds. One of the primary critiques suggested that the concept of symbolic racism and the measures of it do not adequately separate ideology from racism. That is, traditional values like individualism are not really related to race but rather to conservative ideology. As we saw in the case of beliefs about poverty, conservatives are more likely to believe that the individual is responsible for pulling herself up out of poverty rather than viewing it as society's responsibility to help. Thus, opposition to polices such as affirmative action might measure nonracial beliefs about individual responsibility rather than racism. A number of attempts have been made to disentangle conservative ideology from racism and to establish whether opposition to racial policies is necessarily rooted in racism. The question they sought to answer was whether opposition to race-oriented policies really reflects racial antipathy or whether it rather represents ideological principles. In short, must one necessarily be racist to be opposed to affirmative action?

Studies have convincingly demonstrated that symbolic racism is not just a form of political conservatism but rather that it measures beliefs about and feelings toward Blacks specifically. For example, symbolic racism is not related to respondents' attitudes toward policies like food stamps and aid to the homeless. Were the scale simply measuring beliefs about individual responsibility and government assistance, it should be related to such attitudes.[14] An interesting experiment conducted in Canada revealed that being high in symbolic racism was related to opposition to reparations to Aboriginal Canadiens (considered to be people of color), who had been subjected to sexual and physical abuse as children, but not to opposition to reparations when the otherwise identical targets were European Canadiens. And studies have shown that Americans are

more opposed to affirmative action for Blacks than for women,[15] even though white women have benefitted most from the policy.[16] If opposition to the policy were driven by conservative principles rather than racism, then such a difference should not exist. Researchers have suggested that Blacks, more than women, are perceived as not trying hard enough and that this stereotype is largely responsible for opposition to affirmative action.[17] Thus, in the view of many Americans, we wouldn't need affirmative action if only Black people would try harder.

Politicians have played upon this stereotype to further their political goals. Recall Ronald Reagan's use of the "welfare queen" image in a 1976 campaign speech. He painted a picture of a lazy and dishonest Black woman getting rich on public assistance, with hardworking taxpayers bankrolling her luxury cars and vacations. It seems likely that attitudes toward policies aimed at reducing racial inequality draw on negative stereotypes of African Americans as well as those of the poor.

Although there is significant evidence that racial bias is at least partially responsible for the tendency to blame Black Americans themselves for their position in society, another explanation has been presented. Political scientists Brad Gomez and Matthew Wilson documented that political sophistication is also related to the types of attributions individuals make for inequality.[18] They argue that individuals with lower levels of political knowledge and engagement might tend to choose the most proximal or obvious attribution. If someone is poor, the simplest conclusion is that the person himself is to blame. It takes considerable political sophistication to be able to draw a line between an individual's situation and large societal forces. Thus, they argue that a less politically sophisticated person would be more likely to make an individualistic attribution, such as agreeing that if Blacks tried harder, they could be as successful as whites, and a more politically knowledgeable person would be more likely to endorse a structural attribution, such as agreeing that the history of slavery and discrimination make it difficult for Blacks to succeed. The results of their study did support an important role of political sophistication in making structural attributions for racial inequality, although it should be noted that sophistication is also negatively related to racial animus toward Blacks (the more sophisticated, the less racist). This work suggests that there may be multiple factors influencing the types of attributions individuals make for social problems.

The important point of this whirlwind tour through some of the social science research on attitudes toward racial policies is that much of the current work is ultimately focused on blame: Do you blame Black Americans for their current situation or do you blame the legacy of slavery, discrimination, and so on? Though social scientists may not have reached full agreement about the role of racism and other belief systems in determining the attributions people make, there is general agreement that the way individuals place blame for racial inequality is strongly related to support for policies aimed at reducing inequities. Those who blame the individual tend to oppose such policies, while those who blame society tend to support them.[19]

This loaded question of who is to blame for racial inequity is driving a number of current controversies related to race. For example, at the present moment Americans are debating the value of "Critical Race Theory," particularly whether it should be taught in schools. A few states have already banned the topic, and a number of others are considering doing so. So, why the controversy over a theory that most Americans had not even heard of until 2020? The theory, originally suggested by late Harvard Law Professor Derrick Bell and later championed by Columbia Law Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, suggests that racial bias is embedded in US laws and institutions in ways that are often invisible to citizens. For example, government housing policies have amplified inequities in homeownership that will take generations to recover from. Ironically, this relatively obscure legal theory is unlikely to be a part of kindergarten through grade 12 curricula, but that has not stopped politicians from suggesting that it is.

The term Critical Race Theory (CRT) has unfortunately become a catch-all phrase for any attempt to illuminate the effects of historical and present racism on people of color. After hearing about it on Fox News, late in 2020, President Trump issued an executive order banning the use of the theory in diversity training in federal departments. The order was overturned by President Biden, but bans aimed at education are nonetheless being introduced in a number of states. For example, a bill introduced in New Hampshire would "bar schools as well as organizations that have entered into a contract or subcontract with the state from endorsing 'divisive concepts.' Specifically, the measure would forbid 'race

or sex scapegoating,' questioning the value of meritocracy, and suggesting that New Hampshire—or the United States—is 'fundamentally racist.'"[20]

It does not take much imagination to see why CRT is perceived as threatening by individuals who lean strongly conservative. Scapegoating, of course, refers to placing blame on someone who does not deserve it, so, blaming white Americans for racism is prohibited. Why would questioning the value of meritocracy be banned? Because to question meritocracy would be to suggest that we didn't all get where we are based merely on our individual merits. It would suggest that America is not an equal-playing field in which we all have the same opportunity to succeed. It would thus justify blaming things like racism or sexism for one's inability to rise to the top levels of society. I argue that CRT is so controversial precisely because it places the blame for racial inequities on society itself, a structural attribution that most conservatives would not endorse. To do so would be to suggest that our society needs to address the inequities; that is, our society needs to change.

Perhaps the biggest controversy about race in the past decade or more, police killing of Black citizens, also has much to do with perceptions of causality and blame. Does racism make police officers more likely to kill Black Americans or are these incidents brought on by the behavior of the targets themselves? And if racism is a factor, is it endemic to the criminal justice system or really a reflection of a small number of racist cops?

Causes of Police Violence Toward Black Americans: A Few Bad Apples or a Broken System?

On May 25, 2020, Minneapolis police officers arrested George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man accused of passing a $20 counterfeit bill at a convenience store. For roughly nine minutes, Derek Chauvin, kneeled on George Floyd's neck while he cried out that he could not breathe. When the officer finally removed his knee, Mr. Floyd was dead. Because the incident was captured on video by an onlooker's cell phone and widely publicized, a national debate ensued about police use of force toward

Black Americans. Protesters around the world demanded an honest reckoning with the long history of police abuse of people of color. The Black Lives Matter movement, which began several years before, was reinvigorated in its efforts to draw attention to racist violence against Black Americans. Of course, George Floyd was not the first Black person whose death at the hands of police was made public, but his killing did seem to spark a transformation in American attitudes toward racial bias in policing.

Polls conducted soon after the incident revealed that most Americans viewed it as indicative of a broader problem of racial injustice, many more than endorsed that view six years earlier. For example, one poll reported that 74% of Americans overall viewed the killing of George Floyd as reflecting a bigger problem of police treatment of Black Americans.[21] A similar poll seven years earlier indicated that Americans were split on the question of whether there was a broader problem of racism in policing, with only 43% agreeing and 51% indicating that unjustifiable police killings of Black people were isolated incidents.[22] Of course, even in the more recent 2020 poll, Republicans were less likely to endorse the "broader problem" explanation, with only 55% agreeing and 45% saying that Mr. Floyd's killing was an isolated incident. Compare that with 92% of Democrats and 94% of African Americans endorsing the idea that there was a broader problem of police racism. In addition, there is some evidence that the increased awareness of systemic racism immediately after George Floyd's death had begun to wane just a year later. In 2021, polls indicated lower support for the Black Lives Matter movement and fewer Americans endorsing the idea that the incident should be considered a murder than in 2020.[23]

Before considering further the question of Americans' beliefs about racism in policing, we should first establish whether there is evidence that Black Americans are more likely to be victims of police violence than whites and explore why such a difference exists. Black men are 2.5 times as likely as white men to be killed by police over their lifetimes; Black women are about 1.4 times more likely to be killed than white women.[24] But, is it possible that more African Americans are killed by police because they are more likely to initiate an attack on the officer or others at the scene or are more likely to be armed? Data collected on nearly 1000 fatal

police shootings suggest the opposite: there is evidence that Black people killed by police are in fact much less likely to have been attacking the officer or another civilian at the time. They were also significantly less likely to have been armed.[25] There is little doubt that Black Americans are more likely to be killed by police than white Americans. Why might this be? Are police departments filled with overt racists who are out to get African Americans? A more likely explanation at the present time is that, just as with symbolic racism, something more subtle is at work.

Policing is difficult and dangerous. It is not surprising that in many cases of police shootings of civilians, the officer maintains that he feared for his own life when he pulled the trigger. In addition, a recent analysis of traffic stops that turned deadly revealed that police training programs tend to magnify the danger of even routine police duties.[26] There is evidence that police training is so focused on worst-case scenarios that officers are likely to exaggerate the likelihood of a suspect becoming violent. Add to that the fact that police often have to make split-second decisions, such as whether the suspect is reaching for his wallet or for a gun, and you have a situation that is not only volatile but also likely subject to bias. Abundant research in social psychology indicates that our biases most exhibit themselves when we do not have time to process information carefully.

An interesting line of research to examine whether there is racial bias in split-second decisions about a suspect uses computer simulation. Typically, college student or nonstudent adult participants are asked to make decisions about whether or not to shoot a suspect in a simulation similar to a video game. They view a series of images and are instructed to respond to armed targets with a *shoot* response, and to unarmed targets with a *don't-shoot* response as quickly and as accurately as possible. The race of the targets is manipulated, with some targets being Black men and others being white men.[27] The value of these simulation studies is that they are true experiments in which race is changed but all other variables remain constant. This procedure allows the researchers to draw causal conclusions, such as that the race of the target affected participants' judgments. In a study of real-life decision-making, there would be many alternative explanations for any finding, preventing one from drawing causal conclusions—only a relationship between race and outcome could be substantiated.

The results of these simulation experiments consistently reveal a racial bias in decision-making. Specifically, participants' decisions are faster and more accurate when making "stereotype consistent" decisions (deciding to shoot an armed Black man or not to shoot an unarmed white man) than "stereotype inconsistent" decisions (deciding to shoot an armed white man or not to shoot an unarmed Black man). The idea behind these studies is that Americans have absorbed a cultural stereotype associating Black men with violence, and so it is easier and quicker to conclude that a Black man is armed than a white man. Stereotypes are used in part because they aid quick decision-making, even if the decisions are not always accurate. A follow-up study examined not only college student participants but also police officers. Interestingly, they found evidence of racial bias in both groups, but the police officers in the study were quicker to respond, more accurate in their decision-making, and showed somewhat less bias against the Black targets than the college students.[28] Thus, although some social scientists suggest that policing may draw individuals with more racial bias or that the position of being a cop may increase racial bias over time, the findings of this study did not support these ideas. Rather, bias was found to be common among all types of participants, even to nonwhite participants.

This recent research using computer simulation to assess racially biased perceptions is consistent with much earlier experiments. For example, one study in the 1970s reported that participants who viewed a video depicting an ambiguous shove were more likely to perceive the act as violent when it was performed by a Black actor than a white actor.[29] In addition, participants' causal attributions for the action were assessed, revealing that the shove by a white perpetrator was perceived as caused by the situation, whereas the same action by a Black actor was perceived to be caused by the actor's personal disposition. The researcher concluded that the stereotype of Black people as violent influenced both the perception of the situation and its cause. Participants blamed the Black actor for his action but blamed the white person's identical action on the situation.

Sadly, even a mitigating factor, such as mental illness of a perpetrator, does not seem to lessen the blame of and support for aggression against a Black individual. One recent study documented that participants, regardless of their own race, were less approving of the use of force by police

against a mentally ill white target than a non–mentally ill one; however, for Black targets, the effect was reversed. That is, support for use of force against a Black target was actually increased by mental illness.[30] This difference was not present for participants who reported positive feelings toward Black people, suggesting that the pattern of responses was associated with symbolic racism.

To make matters worse, there is evidence that people misperceive even basic physical characteristics of Black targets. In an extensive series of experiments on perceptions of Black and white men, psychologists John Paul Wilson, Kurt Hugenberg, and Nicholas Rule concluded:

> In this research, we found that Americans demonstrated a systematic bias in their perceptions of the physical formidability imposed by Black men. Non-Black perceivers overestimated young Black men as taller, heavier, stronger, more muscular, and more capable of causing physical harm than young white men. Critically, these size and harm perceptions predicted the extent to which perceivers saw force as justified against hypothetical suspects of crime. Specifically, judgments of size fed into biased perceptions of harm capability, and these harm perceptions mediated the link between size perception and force justification.[31]

Even Black children are perceived differently from white children in ways that have far-reaching consequences. Psychologist Phillip Atiba Goff and colleagues conducted a series of experiments to examine perceptions of Black and white children.[32] Because children are generally perceived as more innocent than adults and deserving of protection, they enjoy a special category in our society. However, the research reveals that Black children are judged to be less deserving of protection. Black children were perceived as older than white children. In one of the studies, police officer participants estimated the ages of various children; their average overestimations of the ages of Black children were as high as 4.59 years. As the authors point out, that would mean that a police officer might perceive a 13-year-old Black child as an adult. Black children were also judged to be less innocent than white children, as well as more culpable for their actions. The authors attribute these discrepancies at least in part to the dehumanization of Black children, and indeed found

that participants subliminally exposed to dehumanizing images associating Black people with apes were particularly likely to demonstrate bias.

Believe it or not, the evidence presented here only scratches the surface of the effects of racial bias on perceptions, judgments, and actions. The picture that emerges from much of the research is that people unknowingly misperceive Black individuals in many ways. Those misperceptions almost always exaggerate the threat posed by the person and the degree of blame that should be attributed to him. And as the attributional model we began with predicts, the more someone is held responsible and blamed, the more anger rather than sympathy is experienced. Aggression also appears more justifiable and help less so.

Philosophy professor George Yancy describes his attempts to quell his fear of being pulled over by police when driving in an unfamiliar area, reminding himself that he is not speeding, not under the influence, has an updated car registration, and no weapon. He then realizes that his very body is what has been criminalized by society. None of the facts matter as he is assumed guilty. He captures powerfully the burden this blame places on Black men:

> As Black men, we are taught to believe that it is through our agency that we are responsible for the psychic, cultural and historical debris and wreckage which surrounds our lives. These are lies, modes of projection, bad faith and scapegoating, where white people ritualistically *escape* what it means that their humanity is purchased at the expense of demonizing Black bodies, where the psychic architecture of civil society is what it is because some of us (too many to name) are Black. In this way, Black male racial embodiment is instrumentalized for the purpose of white America's sense of itself as "virtuous" and "civilized."[33]

The consequences of this pattern of assuming Black people are dangerous and culpable are disturbing. Consider the case of 12-year-old Tamir Rice, who was shot and killed by police while he played with a toy gun in a park. The officer who shot him had estimated his age at 20.[34] When his 14-year-old sister rushed to the scene, the white officers tackled her to the ground and handcuffed her. Though investigations suggest many major problems in the Cleveland police force that were probably partially

responsible for the actions of these particular cops, it is clear that misperceptions can have horrible and deadly consequences.

Given the overwhelming evidence that Black Americans are more likely to be shot by police and that racial bias is almost certainly the cause of this unequal use of force, are laypeople's attributions for police violence in line with social science research? As pointed out at the outset of this section, some Americans do endorse the idea that police violence against Black people is part of a broader problem, but many do not. Although the responses leaned more strongly toward the broader problem attribution shortly after the George Floyd murder, the general pattern has long been that white Americans, particularly those that are politically conservative, tend to see police killings of Black men as isolated incidents, whereas Black Americans and those who lean liberal generally tend to attribute such events to a broader problem of racism. Of course, Black Americans are likely to have personal experience with unfair treatment by police that certainly would inform their attributions. Political scientists Donald Haider-Markel and Mark Joslyn suggest that in addition, individuals are influenced by social identities.[35]

Social identity theory holds that individuals' identities are partially made up of the groups to which they belong, as well as by individual characteristics. Thus, one might have an identity that includes things like racial or ethnic group, gender, and so on, so one might identify as an extroverted white woman or an intelligent Black man. Earlier research identified that these group memberships can give rise to the "ultimate attribution error," which is the tendency to attribute a negative behavior on the part of an ingroup member to the situation but that same behavior by an outgroup member would be attributed to the person's disposition. Similarly, good behavior by an ingroup member is viewed as dispositionally caused, whereas good behavior by an outgroup member is attributed to the situation.[36] Recall the study of the ambiguous shove by a white versus Black actor. Haider-Markel and Joslyn, using data from large surveys, found evidence for this tendency and suggest that our group memberships, such as those based on race and political orientation, are a filter through which we process information, especially causal attribution. They use the ultimate attribution error to explain white Americans' preference for attributing police use of excessive force on Black suspects to "a few bad apples" rather than systemic racism.

Because political ideology and race influence attributions for police violence against Black Americans, it is not surprising that they also influence people's responses to protests against racism in policing. Research has shown a very similar pattern to that found in regard to attributions for police use of force. A study examining attributions for the 1992 riots that followed the acquittal of the police officers who had been filmed beating a Black American named Rodney King in Los Angeles revealed that respondents' race was a critical dividing line in their attributions.[37] White people were more likely to endorse causes of the riots that blamed the individual rioters, such as people taking advantage of the situation. Black respondents were more likely to endorse causes of the riots that were situational (the jury decision, a broken system, the need to change the situation). As the attributional model would predict, white respondents expressed more anger and less pity toward the rioters as well as less anger and more pity toward the police than did Black respondents.

More recently, Haider-Markel, Joslyn, and colleagues examined attributions for riots in Baltimore, Maryland after police mistreatment that led to the death of Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old Black resident.[38] Their studies revealed that Black, liberal, and Democrat respondents leaned toward situational attributions for the unrest, such as anger about the treatment of Freddie Gray and tensions with police, whereas conservatives and Republicans were more likely to believe the riots were caused by people taking advantage of the situation to engage in criminal activity. They also found that participants responded differently to a general question about whether protests over unfair treatment make the country better depending on whether the protesters were identified as Americans or as Black Americans. Whereas 68% of white respondents agreed that protests by "Americans" were good for the country, only 48% agreed that protests by "Black Americans" were good for the country. The pattern for Black respondents was reversed and less dramatic (slightly more positive responses to Black American than American protests).

The very meaning and value of protest seems to depend upon who is doing the protesting. And although there was general sadness that the protests in Baltimore became destructive, they were explained in different ways. Writer Ta-Nehisi Coates said, "Rioting is not an attempt to do what is unimpeachably morally correct. It is an expression of anger. Some

humans riot because their school lost the big game. Others because the State can't stop killing them."[39] Donald Trump, who was not yet president at the time, called the protesters and rioters thugs in a controversial tweet that also placed some blame on the first Black president of the US: "Our great African American President hasn't exactly had a positive impact on the thugs who are so happily and openly destroying Baltimore!"[40] Notice again the stark differences in how these two individuals place blame, one on a racist system that keeps killing Black people and the other on thugs who are gleefully destroying the city.

But what about protests that are truly peaceful and not destructive of property? Could it be that the reactions to the Los Angeles and Baltimore riots were so varied because those protests became riots, and emotions were running high? Let's consider a peaceful protest.

In 2016, a San Francisco 49ers football player, Colin Kaepernick, kneeled rather than standing next to his fellow players during the playing of the American national anthem. He indicated that he was protesting oppression of Black people and people of color.[41] His actions followed a summer in which there had been several shootings of unarmed Black men. A number of players began to follow suit, and protests eventually spread outside the US and continued for some time. The action was controversial, to say the least. Though some people respected Kaepernick for his commitment to racial justice, such as President Obama, others slammed the action as unpatriotic and disrespectful. President Trump, for example, referred to any protester as a "son of a bitch" and urged the owners to remove them from the field.[42]

This range of responses was reflected by the American populous as a whole, and, again, there were strong differences based on race. One survey reported that 74% of African Americans approved of these protests, whereas 63% of whites opposed them.[43] In addition, racial bias had a remarkably strong effect on the attitudes of white Americans. Those who endorsed stereotypes of Black people as lazy, unintelligent, and violent were much more likely to oppose the protests, even after controlling for many factors like ideology, partisanship, and age.

Another study was aimed at examining variables besides race that might be related to views of these protests. Psychologists Evelyn Stratmoen, Tiffany Lawless, and Donald Saucier[44] hypothesized that

individuals may differ in the tendency to make attributions to prejudice. That is, they suggest that some people are more likely to attribute a variety of situations to prejudice, particularly in ambiguous circumstances, whereas others are less likely to see prejudice as to blame. For example, if a Black student is failed by a white teacher for cheating, one individual might attribute it to prejudice and another to a different cause. They further theorized that individual differences in "masculine honor beliefs" could be related to views of the protests. Masculine honor beliefs hold that it is a man's responsibility to protect his reputation, his family, and his community against threats or insults, using violence if necessary. Because the protests might represent a perceived threat or insult to one's country, they suggested that the tendency to endorse these beliefs might be linked with opposition to those protests. Indeed, their results supported that individuals more likely to make attributions to prejudice and those lower in the endorsement of masculine honor beliefs were more approving of the protests. In their words, "Together, these findings suggest those who have a better understanding of, or more sympathy toward, current racial issues underlying the protests view protesters as more respectful and appropriate, while those without this sympathy and understanding view protesters as disrespectful and inappropriate".[45] Once again, if one sees prejudice, something external to and uncontrollable by the protestors, as the reason for the protests, she is likely to experience sympathy and indicate support for the protesters. If one blames the individual, there is little sympathy and little support.

It is clear that attitudes toward racial inequality are complicated, with many possible variables influencing them. But it is equally clear that there is a common denominator in much of the research: blame. Does one blame the system or does one blame the individual? It is striking that so much scholarly work about an issue that is so complex boils down to blame.

It is possible, dear reader, that you are feeling as demoralized reading this chapter as I am feeling writing it. If so, I'd like to offer some hope. There is evidence that people's beliefs about racial inequality can be influenced by the way the issue is discussed and the information that is presented. People can become aware of forces that they did not previously recognize. I will return to this hopeful message in the final chapter.

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5

Issues of Violence

Why Do They Hate Us?

It is fair to say that no event in recent history has prompted Americans to ask "why" questions as much as did the attacks on the US that took place on September 11, 2001. The nation, and for that matter, the world, was shocked by what appeared to be a sudden and unprovoked attack. Understandably, people were fearful and angry and wanted someone to blame. President George W. Bush was quick to blame "evildoers" who hated America for its freedoms and to promise vengeance. In his address to a joint session of congress and the American people, Bush stated:

> Americans are asking, why do they hate us? They hate what we see right here in this chamber—a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms—our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.[1]

On the other hand, Author Susan Sontag offered a very different analysis of the cause of the attack:

G. Sahar, *Blame and Political Attitudes*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-20236-0_5

> Where is the acknowledgement that this was not a "cowardly" attack on "civilization" or "liberty" or "the free world" but an attack on the world's self-proclaimed super-power, undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliances and actions?[2]

Clearly, the Bush administration placed blame entirely on the perpetrators and their irrational hatred of the US, whereas Sontag argued that American foreign policy might have been at least partially responsible for the attacks. What did ordinary Americans think was the cause of the attacks and of the anti-American sentiment that motivated them? The answer to those questions depends not only on whom you ask but also when you ask them.

In October of 2001, I conducted a study to examine college students' attributions for the attacks.[3] Participants indicated the degree to which they perceived the US and the terrorists to be responsible for the attacks. Similar to the studies of poverty and unwanted pregnancy, participants were presented with ten possible causes of the attacks and asked to rate each in terms of its importance. These ratings were then subjected to an analysis that grouped them into meaningful categories of causes. Once again, the causes divided themselves into three sensible groupings: American foreign policy, resentment of the US due to its success and values, and characteristics of the perpetrators themselves. The ten causes are displayed in Fig. 5.1.

The first category, US foreign policy, includes causes that reflect actions taken by the US; the other two hold the terrorists themselves responsible either because of their jealousy and resentment of the US or their fundamentalist beliefs and mental instability. Thus, the causes were differentiated by perceived responsibility as in other domains.

Because relevant worldviews have been shown to influence attributions, it was important to consider the ideological beliefs of the participants. But which ideology or worldview would be associated with beliefs about blame for the attack? I reasoned that patriotism was the most relevant ideology in this case. At first glance, it seemed likely that the most patriotic Americans might be the least likely to hold the US responsible in any way. However, previous research has demonstrated that there is more than one kind of patriotism. Indeed, "blind patriotism," a "my

Fig. 5.1 The ten causes of the 9/11 attacks divided by type. (From Sahar, G. (2008). Patriotism and attributions for the 9/11 attacks: Then and now. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology, 30*, 1–9)

country right or wrong" sort of approach, is characterized by an unquestioning support of the nation and a resistance to criticism of it. "Constructive patriotism," on the other hand, allows for critical analysis of a nation and holds that criticism is necessary for the country to improve.[4] A person high in blind patriotism would tend to agree with items such as "I would support my country right or wrong" and "The anti-Vietnam War protesters were un-American." Those high in constructive patriotism would tend to agree with statements like "People should work hard to move this country in a positive direction" and "I oppose some U.S. policies because I care about my country and want to improve it." I measured both types of patriotism to examine their relations with the causal attributions for the attack.

Participants indicated the degree to which they feared for their own safety, feared for the safety of the nation, and felt vulnerable and anxious.

These items allowed me to test whether feeling under threat related to patriotism and blame for the attacks. And finally, support for the US military action in Afghanistan was assessed, as was the belief that the US would successfully defeat the terrorists.

Recall that these data were collected just a month after the attacks. Emotions were raw for most Americans at that time. Because I was curious about whether these initial reactions would change over time, I also collected data on another set of college student participants four years later, in 2005. I asked all the same questions, with one addition: degree of support for the military action in Iraq, which was underway at that time. A number of interesting findings emerged that shed light on Americans' perceptions, beliefs, and emotions at the two time points.

On average, the participants viewed all the causes as relatively important; however, there were differences across types of patriotism. Those who were higher in blind patriotism were more likely to believe that resentment of US successes and values motivated the terrorists and less likely to blame American foreign policy. Thus, their views were more in line with President Bush's perspective than Sontag's. The blindly patriotic were also less likely to hold the US responsible for the attacks and less likely to blame the US for anti-American hostility. Finally, they were more confident that the US would triumph over terrorism and more supportive of military action. Those higher in constructive patriotism were more likely to endorse US foreign policy as an important causal factor, though they viewed all three types of causes as relatively important, suggesting a complex view of what caused the attacks.

Some interesting differences also emerged between the two time points. Not surprisingly, in 2001, just after the attacks, the participants felt more under threat than did the participants in 2005. More significantly, blind patriotism was higher in 2001 than in 2005, as was support for the war with Afghanistan. Why would blind patriotism change over time if it is truly a worldview? First, we must be cautious in that there were two different groups of people surveyed at the two time points. On the other hand, they were found to be quite similar in terms of age, gender, and party identification. So, what was different? A few studies suggest that patriotism, particularly blind patriotism, increases when individuals feel under threat.[5] More generally, there is some evidence that

political ideology shifts toward the right during times of uncertainty or threat. For example, one study demonstrated a conservative shift in high-exposure survivors of the 9/11 attacks. The researchers hypothesized that a core aspect of conservatism, the desire to preserve existing social institutions, can be comforting in a time of threat, reducing fear and uncertainty.[6] When individuals feel vulnerable, political conservatism (clinging to tradition) and blind patriotism (clinging to one's nation) might serve as comforting defense mechanisms.[7] Those of us who were around in September of 2001 probably recall the proliferation of American flags and other symbols of patriotism and unity, providing anecdotal evidence that patriotism had risen.

Blind patriotism has been found to be strongly related to nationalism, which goes beyond a positive attachment to country to include feelings of national superiority and support for national dominance. Thus, it would make sense that it might be particularly associated with the tendency toward the "ultimate attribution error" discussed in the last chapter. If one has uncritical loyalty to one's country and perhaps views it as superior to other countries, it is not surprising that the individual would endorse attributions that are flattering to the nation. Indeed, those high in blind patriotism attributed more responsibility to the terrorists and less responsibility to the US for both the attacks and anti-American hostility, and were more supportive of the war in Afghanistan (and, at the second time point, the war in Iraq.)

The picture was somewhat different in 2005, by which time, participants felt less threatened, were lower in blind patriotism, and were less supportive of the war in Afghanistan. Most important for our purposes, however, at both time points, the less participants held the US responsible and the more they held the terrorists responsible, the greater was the support for war. In addition, blind patriotism had two paths to support for war, one direct and one through the mediating variable of responsibility of the terrorists. As in prior studies, attitude was linked to worldview, meaning that being high in blind patriotism was associated with greater support for war, but in addition to that, being high in blind patriotism was associated with perceiving the terrorists as more responsible, and that elevated perception of responsibility was linked with greater support for war. Other studies documented similar findings.[8]

It is thus clear that Americans' feelings about who was to blame for the 9/11 attacks had a strong influence on their attitudes toward American military actions in response. Of course, this fact was not lost on politicians who were anxious to take such actions. As many readers will recall, President George W. Bush justified the American war on Iraq by implying that Iraq had some responsibility for the 9/11 attacks when, in fact, no link between al-Qaeda (the group that carried out the attack) and the Iraqi regime was ever discovered. Placing blame for acts of terrorism or acts of war has far-reaching consequences because it is likely to determine whether or not the public will support retaliatory actions. Errors in judgment about blame can result in a colossal loss of lives.

Why was President George W. Bush convinced that the 9/11 attacks were motivated by a hatred of the American way of life, specifically American freedoms? Though his assumption might have seemed plausible, there are certainly alternative causal explanations, some of which were examined in the study I just described, such as the history of American actions in the Middle East. The president's conclusion was consistent with a particular thesis about international relations, especially relations between Muslim countries and the West. This thesis, first put forth by historian Bernard Lewis in an article entitled, "The Roots of Muslim Rage"[9] and expanded by political scientist Samuel Huntington in an article followed by a book on the so-called Clash of Civilizations,[10] suggested that since the end of the Cold War, the major cause of conflict in the world would be due, not to differences in ideology or economic interest, but to dramatic differences in culture. Huntington identifies a number of "civilizations," though his focus is largely on conflict between "Islam" and the "West." Though a thorough analysis of Huntington's theory is beyond the scope of this book, the upshot of his argument is that human beings possess "civilization identities." These powerful identities differ in language, values, religion, and so on. Those differences will cause clashes, particularly between the "West" and everyone else. George W. Bush, who was said to be a fan of Huntington,[11] advanced causal explanations of the 9/11 attacks that were very much in line with this thesis. Why do so many in the Islamic Arab world hate us? They hate us because of our freedom, our Western ways.

The theory made a big splash when it was first published, and it is still frequently returned to; however, it has also been criticized on a number of grounds. Prominent intellectual Edward Said pointed out the limitations of monolithic groupings such as the "West" and "Islam," both of which include diverse groups, as well as a failure to acknowledge the increasing interaction between and interdependence of cultures in the modern world.[12]

Though most research focused on Americans' beliefs about the causes of the 9/11 attacks, political psychologist Jim Sidanius and colleagues examined the attributions of citizens of the Arab world in an effort to empirically test Huntington's clash of civilizations theory.[13] In this series of studies, students at the American University of Beirut, Lebanon (all of whom were from Middle Eastern countries), rated the importance of a number of possible causes of the attacks. Some of the causes were consistent with the clash of civilizations hypothesis, such as a dislike of democracy, a conflict between Islam and Christianity, and a clash between Islamic and Western values (e.g., the role of women in society). The remaining causes were chosen to represent an alternate theory of intergroup conflict, the antidominance perspective. This perspective springs from the idea that social groups as well as nation states are organized into a hierarchy of dominant and subordinate powers, with those at the top wielding outsize influence on international relations. Because the US enjoys military and economic dominance over the rest of the world, the authors suggest that it stands in a category of its own at the top of the hierarchy. They further argue that the attacks might have represented an attempt to challenge American hegemony rather than an assault on American culture. Causes more consistent with this approach included those relating to American support of Israel, mistreatment of Iraq, military presence in Saudi Arabia, and so on. Their goal in this study was to test which theory was most supported by the data.

The data revealed that these Arab respondents endorsed the antidominance causes over the clash of civilization causes. Specifically, they saw the attacks as motivated by resentment of American actions in the Middle East, its policies, more than by hatred of Western values. In the words of the authors:

> Clearly, then, in the minds of these young Arab subelites, the events of September 11 are not framed or understood as a rejection of Western values, a rejection of democracy, some vague desire to return to the 14th century, or as a desire to exert dominance over the West.[14] (p. 413)

Interestingly, Muslim participants in the study, which comprised about half of the total sample, were even less likely to endorse the clash of civilization causes than the Christian respondents. Again, this pattern would not be predicted by Huntington's theory.

Of course, it is not possible to ask the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks why they carried them out. We cannot know for sure whether the views of these Arab college students are representative of the terrorists' views or even of the majority of Arab citizens. However, the study was important in that the results contradicted the highly influential clash of civilizations thesis, one that may well have influenced American foreign policy.

Neither is the theory consistent with the so-called Arab Spring of the early 2010s in which anti-government protests broke out in many Middle Eastern and North African countries. One would not expect individuals who supposedly hate Western freedoms to risk their lives participating in uprisings aimed at replacing corrupt political regimes with democratically elected ones. *New York Times* columnist David Brooks provided an interesting social-psychological explanation for Huntington's error in assuming that citizens of predominantly Muslim countries do not value freedom and human rights. Brooks stated, "In retrospect, I'd say that Huntington committed the Fundamental Attribution Error. That is, he ascribed to traits qualities that are actually determined by context."[15] In short, just because a person living under a brutal authoritarian regime does not *have* freedom, it does not necessarily follow that she does not *want* freedom. When the opportunity arose, many Arab citizens took to the streets in hopes of bringing down their oppressive governments. Unfortunately, most of these uprisings were violently repressed, but for a brief time the world had an opportunity to learn that there is nothing essential to Arab and/or Muslim cultural identity that makes one prefer authoritarianism. Quoting Brooks again:

> But it seems clear that many people in Arab nations do share a universal hunger for liberty. They feel the presence of universal human rights and feel insulted when they are not accorded them.
>
> Culture is important, but underneath cultural differences there are these universal aspirations for dignity, for political systems that listen to, respond to and respect the will of the people.

Though Huntington's theory is important to evaluate because of its influence, he is not alone in making different attributions for the actions of other groups than for those of his own group. Perhaps he was influenced not only by the fundamental attribution error but also by the ultimate attribution error. As we have already touched upon, the ultimate attribution error describes this common tendency to make attributions that flatter one's own group and reflect negatively on the outgroup (a group to which one does not belong and with which one's own group may even be in conflict). A number of studies document that this bias happens at the international level and, unfortunately, may be one of the factors that makes intractable conflicts, those that are violent and last a long time, so intractable. And when political psychologists of the current era think of the ultimate intractable conflict, the Palestinian-Israeli crisis is likely to come to mind.

This conflict, which has now continued for more than 70 years, is characterized by competing narratives, with Israelis and Palestinians generally offering very different versions of the history. Each side sees the other as the aggressor and its own people as victims. Each tends to view their own violent actions as reactive rather than proactive. And there is a tendency for Israelis to view Palestinians as driven by hatred and for Palestinians to assume the same of Israelis. Social scientists have labeled this latter tendency "motive attribution asymmetry" and suggested that it is one of the main factors driving intractable conflict.[16] Who wants to compromise with a group that one believes to be filled with hatred of oneself?

Researchers Adam Waytz, Liane Young, and Jeremy Ginges suggest that in fact people in an intergroup conflict could be motivated by hatred of the outgroup, but they could also be driven by love of the ingroup. Do Israelis aggress against Palestinians because they hate them or because

they love Israel? Similarly, do Palestinians take aggressive action because they hate Israelis or love Palestine? Their survey of Palestinians and Israeli Jews revealed the predicted asymmetry: each side viewed its own group as more motivated by love and the outgroup driven by hate. In addition, they documented evidence that the stronger this bias to attribute the other group's actions to hate, the lower one's willingness to negotiate or support a peace deal, and the lower is one's optimism for the future. Though these attributions of love and hate are a bit different from the sorts of causes we've been discussing, the study illustrates the power of endorsing attributions that serve to demonize the outgroup. An earlier study of Israeli attributions for the conflict also suggested that the more Israel was seen as having a causal role in the conflict, the greater support for negotiated concessions in an effort to resolve the conflict.[17] A more recent one documented that when Israelis and Americans perceived terrorist acts as motivated by hatred, they supported harsher counterterrorism methods than if they viewed the acts as motivated by lack of opportunity.[18] Again, our assumptions about the causes of the actions of others affect our responses.

Terrorism Is What the Other Guys Do

Not only do Israelis and Palestinians make causal attributions for the conflict that support their own group, but they also define specific events in ingroup-flattering ways. A study conducted by Jacob Shamir and Khalil Shikaki in late 2001,[19] after a period of violent interactions that resulted in many Israeli deaths and still more Palestinian deaths, asked Israeli Jews, Israeli Arabs, and Palestinians to indicate whether several local and international violent incidents constituted acts of terrorism. As predicted, the responses of Israeli Jews and Palestinians were mirror images of each other, with Israeli Jews rating Palestinian actions as terrorism and Israeli actions as not terrorism, and Palestinians viewing the Israeli actions as terrorism and the Palestinian ones as not terrorism. Interestingly, most Israeli Arabs, who are Palestinians with Israeli citizenship, defined all the actions committed by both sides as terrorism. They explain this finding in regard to Israeli Arabs using a social identity

approach: these individuals who share ethnic kinship with the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories and citizenship with Israeli Jews are torn between these two identities. Perhaps I am an optimist, but I believe this finding offers hope should there ever be a single unified state consisting of Israeli Jews and Palestinians—it is apparent that citizenship does affect one's perceptions in meaningful ways. Specifically, one's ingroup shifts to include individuals formerly part of the outgroup. The researchers also asked participants to indicate how they believe the rest of the world viewed the various violent actions. They found that both Israeli Jews and Palestinians provided a "hostile world" interpretation in which they estimated that the rest of the world would tend to define their own group's actions as terrorism and the other group's actions as not terrorism. Clearly, both sides believe that the rest of the world views them harshly and unfairly.

As this study illustrates, perceptions of terrorism are self-serving, but one could argue that these perceptions are so subject to bias in part because there is not a universally accepted definition of the concept. Some aspects are generally agreed upon: that it includes violence directed at civilians and that it is intended to instill fear to pressure individuals or groups to change something.[20] But a definition relying on such vague elements without attention to context would likely give rise to many different interpretations. Some theorists maintain that this ambiguity is intentional to allow the powerful to apply the concept as they see fit. One could argue that countries in the West have carried out acts of "terrorism," and yet the term is rarely used to refer to US actions or actions of American allies. In a book about the use of language for political ends, John Collins states:

> The point here is that *any* explicit definition of "terrorism" could be used to identify and condemn the actions of the United States and many of its allies. Maintaining the illusion of U.S. blamelessness, therefore, *requires that "terrorism" not be defined at all.*[21]

The author suggests that instead of a clear definition politicians use tautological arguments, such as that terrorism is what terrorists do. All the more reason, then, that individuals would perceive specific possible

examples in a variety of ways. For instance, there is evidence that Americans are less likely to use the term "terrorism" to describe violence committed by a white American. After Dylann Roof killed nine Black Americans at the AME church in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2015, Anthea Butler described the long history of white supremacist acts intended to terrorize the Black community and concluded:

> But listen to major media outlets, and you won't hear the word "terrorism" used in coverage of Wednesday's shooting. You haven't heard the white, male suspect, 21-year-old Dylann Roof, described as "a possible terrorist" by mainstream news organizations (though some, including The Washington Post, have covered the growing debate about this discrepancy). And if coverage of other recent shootings by white men is any indication, he never will be. Instead, the go-to explanation for his alleged actions will be mental illness. He will be humanized and called sick, a victim of mistreatment or inadequate mental health resources.[22]

Butler's observation fits with Saif Shahin's model of two types of frames of violent events used in media coverage: the "blame frame" versus the "explain frame."[23] The blame frame tends to focus on the guilt of a perpetrator who is represented as alien to our society. The explain frame, alternatively, focuses on uncontrollable factors that led to the event. Shahin does not suggest that these frames are necessarily intentional; journalists are influenced by the same cultural beliefs as other citizens and likely reproduce them. However, these frames unfortunately reinforce the existing hierarchies in society by suggesting that terrible acts are mostly due to derogated outgroups rather than our own good and civilized community members. A violent act by an immigrant or Muslim is assumed to be motivated by ideology or religion; the same act by a white American is due to factors such as mental illness and therefore aberrant and not indicative of a broader societal problem.

Butler's contention is also consistent with recent social-psychological research on perceptions of violence. Not only do the mainstream media tend to frame the same acts differently depending on the race and/or religion of the accused perpetrators, but citizens tend to perceive them differently, particularly if they hold prejudiced attitudes toward the

perpetrator's group. One series of studies, using both real examples of mass shootings and created vignettes in which the religion of the perpetrator was varied, documented that individuals with negative views of Muslims rated Muslim shooters as less mentally ill than non-Muslim shooters even if the description of the person included clear symptoms of mental illness.[24] In addition, Muslim shooters were perceived as having been more motivated by religion than non-Muslim shooters, especially among those with negative attitudes toward Muslims. Why might individuals assume that religion was a more important cause and mental illness a less important one? The authors suggest that because mental illness is an exculpatory factor, reducing the responsibility and blame of the shooter and of Islam as a religion, those with anti-Muslim attitudes are motivated to avoid such an attribution. In short, they want to blame the shooter, and because one can't blame someone for something that was not under their control, this attribution to mental illness would contradict their motives. The authors refer to this tendency as a form of motivated reasoning, the need to ascribe events to attributions that fit with a particular worldview. As they point out, one unfortunate outcome of the tendency is that it leads one to overestimate the threat of Islamic terrorism.

In fact, a study conducted in Norway has shown that when asked to provide a mental representation of the appearance of a terrorist who was mentally ill versus one who was motivated by ideology, white participants imagined the former as whiter and the latter as looking more Middle Eastern.[25] Moreover, the whiter perpetrator was perceived as less guilty. The authors, Jonas Kunst, Lisa Myhren, and Ivuoman Onyeador, conclude: "Simply raising mental illness as motivation may be enough to shift the mental representations of the race of terrorists to be more White and consequently reduce perceptions of their guilt."

This propensity to make group-serving attributions for violent acts extends beyond Muslim perpetrators. Masi Noor and colleagues conducted a series of studies to examine the tendency to attribute a violent action to terrorism, a condemnatory motive, versus mental illness, an exculpatory motive.[26] In one study using a British sample, they examined attributions for the killing of a British member of parliament just prior to the Brexit decision (to leave the European Union). The victim was known to support the "Remain" campaign to keep Britain in the EU. They

discovered that individuals who supported the "Leave" campaign were much more likely to attribute the killer's motive to mental illness (as opposed to terrorism) than were the participants who supported "Remain." In addition, the more they attributed the killing to mental illness, the lower was the level of punitiveness toward the killer. In a second study in Germany, they examined attributions for a suicide attack by a Syrian refugee and documented that pro-immigration participants were more likely to attribute the motive to mental illness (as opposed to terrorism) than were anti-immigration participants. The attribution to mental illness was again associated with lower punitiveness, in this case toward refugees as a group. It is thus clear from research based on reactions to real events and experimentally manipulated vignettes that attributions to terrorism are highly subjective and vary according to the worldview and motivation of the observer. It is equally clear that labeling perpetrators as terrorists rather than as mentally ill has strong effects on the desire to punish them.

How to Stop a Bad Guy With a Gun

I am writing this in the wake of a series of mass shootings in the US, the most shocking of which took place in the small town of Uvalde, Texas, where a young gunman killed 19 elementary school students and 2 teachers and injured many more. In addition to the outrage and sadness expressed across the country, there were also many discussions, as occurs after every mass shooting, about why these horrific events keep happening. The governor of Texas, Greg Abbott, said:

> Evil swept across Uvalde yesterday. Anyone who shoots his grandmother in the face has to have evil in his heart, but it is far more evil for someone to gun down little kids. It is intolerable and it is unacceptable for us to have in this state anybody who would kill little kids in our schools.[27]

Within days of the horrific event, the National Rifle Association was meeting in nearby Houston. Isaac Arnsdorf reported for the *Washington Post*:

> The GOP speakers shifted blame for the latest tragedy from the availability of high-powered weapons to an array of other culprits, such as declining church attendance, physical and social media bullying, weak families, violent video games, opioid abuse, lack of mental health services, multiple points of entry at schools and unlocked doors.[28]

Most Democrats, on the other hand, blamed the availability and lack of control over guns in the US, particularly semiautomatic weapons such as the one used by this 18-year-old shooter, Salvador Ramos. Outcries for increased gun control were heard across the nation along with acknowledgments that without Republican support any new legislation would not successfully pass. Republicans, meanwhile, suggested that gun control is not the answer and that, as the NRA chief executive Wayne LaPierre said after the similarly horrific school massacre in Newtown, Connecticut, a decade earlier, the only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun, whether that entails placing an armed officer at every school or the arming of teachers themselves. For American citizens, this spectacle seems to play out on a continuous loop after each such shooting with the two sides talking past each other. Those in favor of gun control cannot understand how anyone could place an unlimited right to bear arms over the protection of human life. Why is it that those on the right and the left have such drastically different responses to the question of what should be done to stop these tragedies? Recent empirical studies offer some answers, and as you've certainly guessed, they focus on blame.

Wolfgang Stroebe and colleagues examined responses to two different mass shootings, the 2016 Orlando nightclub shooting and the 2019 shooting at a Walmart in El Paso.[29] The authors were seeking to understand how mass shootings do not necessarily translate into greater support for gun control. They developed a gun blame attribution model, which was supported by the data sets. According to this model, gun owners and conservatives, two groups that do not entirely overlap, tend to believe that crime would decrease if more people had guns. This belief is in turn related to a perception that gun availability was not to blame for the shootings. And finally, the belief that guns were not to blame was associated with lower support for gun control measures. Thus, the logic is clear: one would only want to restrict guns after a mass shooting if one

believes the guns were to blame. Another study reported similar findings and further suggested that gun ownership can be a social identity and therefore influence group members to make group-serving attributions.[30] A gun owner would be unlikely to suggest that guns were the problem because that attribution would undermine the motives of the group: keeping guns readily available and avoiding the stigma of being responsible for the loss of human life.

These studies help to explain why some Americans do not endorse gun control as a solution, and given the large percentage of citizens who own guns, they do not offer encouraging news to those hoping to strengthen current laws. About one-third of Americans personally own a gun, and about 40% live in a household with guns.[31] The most common reason they own them is for personal protection, in line with the "good guy with a gun" theory of improving public safety.

It's worth further dissecting the oft-repeated statement that the best way to stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun. It has clear implications for attribution of blame for gun violence. What causes mass shootings? The answer is simple: bad guys. And what makes bad guys bad? They are driven by evil, as proclaimed by Governor Abbott after the Uvalde massacre. What does it mean to suggest someone is evil and why is this explanation so frequently used? There are extensive analyses of "evil" in philosophy and some in psychology, but the roots of this term in American culture probably lie in the country's Christian heritage.

Scholar of the New Testament, Esau McCauley, points out that evil is the go-to explanation for mass shootings for gun rights advocates.[32] In his article in response to the Uvalde shooting, he suggests that the idea of having evil in one's heart comes directly from the teachings of Jesus. This sort of evil is a result of something wrong with an individual person. McCauley states:

> It seems that Christian politicians who favor fewer restrictions on guns highlight this idea because it limits the responsibility for evil to the individual. We cannot eliminate evil hearts, so we cannot stop mass shootings. It does not matter that America far outpaces other nations in mass shootings; we must have an unexplainable abundance of evil hearts here.

This treatment of evil as a characteristic of an individual and thus that person's sole responsibility is not an entirely incorrect interpretation of the Bible, according to McCauley, but rather it is a woefully incomplete accounting of Christian theology's explanation of evil. In fact, evil can arise from three different sources: the flesh, the devil, and the world. In focusing on only the individual level (the flesh), some pro-gun politicians are choosing to ignore that the Bible discusses other sources of evil. In particular, according to McCauley, Christian theology holds that society is also responsible for reducing evil:

> Christian theology has long focused on the government's need to restrain social evil. We have never expected governments to change hearts or even to solve every social ill. We have expected governments to have an impact on culture, changing and adjusting laws that allow the evil of the world to flourish. I do not need the government to change Salvador Ramos's heart. I want it to make sure that others like him don't have access to an AR-style assault rifle and 375 rounds of ammunition.

It may well be that politicians who seem to be using Christian conceptions of evil as a way of blaming mass shootings on the individual are not aware of the full doctrine on the topic. Whether it is an intentional misuse of Christian teaching or due to ignorance, the outcome is the same: the individual bad guy, not the guns, is to blame. And given the fit of this analysis with the American, especially conservative American, belief in the importance of individual responsibility, many people do not question this conclusion.

Some Final Thoughts on Responsibility for Violent Actions: I Was Just Following Orders

I have just finished arguing that there is not much justification for suggesting that gun violence is purely the responsibility of the individual. I personally do believe that societies have a responsibility to protect their citizens from harm to the extent they can. However, the implications of

how we place blame for violent acts are complicated. I think it's important to emphasize that we also would not want to live in a society in which individuals felt no responsibility for their actions. Unfortunately, lack of personal responsibility has been used to justify horrible acts of violence.

The most famous example of this justification was used by Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann during the Nuremberg Trials in an attempt to avoid responsibility for his actions. A letter Eichmann wrote in 1962 after he was convicted, in which he pleaded for his life, was recently released. In the letter, Eichmann writes: "There is a need to draw a line between the leaders responsible and the people like me forced to serve as mere instruments in the hands of the leaders."[33] He goes on to say that because he was not one of these responsible leaders, he did not consider himself to be guilty.

At the time that Eichmann wrote this letter, psychologist Stanley Milgram was running his now-famous studies of obedience to authority. He was attempting to empirically test the idea that a person will perform actions under the orders of an authority figure that violate the individual's ethical standards. In an extensive series of experiments, Milgram set up a situation in which a naïve subject was ordered to administer increasingly strong shocks to an innocent man whom he believed to be another naïve subject.[34] The participant was told that the experiments were about the effects of punishment on learning. He was to act as a teacher, instructed to shock the other participant, the learner (who was really a confederate of the experiment), every time he gave a wrong answer on a memory test. In fact, the experiments were designed to observe the teachers, and no real shocks were given. There were many versions of the experiment in which a number of different variables were examined. The main finding of the series of studies was that a surprising number of people will follow orders to harm another individual even if they feel quite uncomfortable doing so. In the standard version of the study that is most well-known, approximately two-thirds of the participants fully obeyed the orders of the experimenter, believing they were administering shocks of up to 450 volts to a complete stranger who had done nothing to deserve the punishment.

Milgram suggested that when a person is a part of a hierarchical system and being ordered to do something by an authority figure, that person enters into an "agentic state." Rather than acting as an autonomous individual, the person begins to see himself as an agent of the authority. Milgram explains:

> Although a person acting under authority performs actions that seem to violate standards of conscience, it would not be true to say that he loses his moral sense. Instead, it acquires a radically different focus. He does not respond with a moral sentiment to the actions he performs. Rather, his moral concern now shifts to a consideration of how well he is living up to the expectations that the authority has of him. In wartime, a soldier does not ask whether it is good or bad to bomb a hamlet; he does not experience shame or guilt in the destruction of a village: rather he feels pride or shame depending on how well he has performed the mission assigned to him.[35]

Milgram applied his analysis to real-world events, such as the My Lai Massacre in Vietnam during which American soldiers killed hundreds of innocent Vietnamese men, women, and children, though his original intention was to further our understanding of Nazi war crimes. Other psychologists have supported the important role authority plays in such situations, causing a person to act in ways that are foreign to her conscience, particularly during wars or other campaigns of violence toward an outgroup.[36]

A recent series of experiments by a group of cognitive neuroscientists documented that brain activity as measured by an EEG is actually different when one is following an order rather than choosing an action independently.[37] Specifically they found that acting under coercion reduced brain activity related to processing the outcomes of one's actions. They describe doing something under orders as more akin to a passive action than an actively chosen one, distancing the individual from fully considering what she or he has done.

But does the knowledge that human beings are vulnerable to the influence of authority figures mean that we are relieved of personal responsibility for our actions when under their orders? This is a moral question rather than one that can be answered with empirical evidence. And it is

one I ask my students whenever I teach about the Milgram studies. They generally respond as I hope they would: that the studies might help us to understand what happens to a person psychologically under the influence of an authority figure; however, to understand is not to justify. The individual still shoulders blame for immoral actions. Rather than using the results to justify an unethical act, one might instead become aware of the importance of never losing sight of one's moral compass, and using the old 1960s slogan: question authority.

In this chapter, I have focused on violence that has political implications, though, of course, individual acts of violence can be analyzed using attribution theory. Murder defenses are centered around reducing blame of the perpetrator, and indeed sentences are lower if his or her actions were viewed as not under his or her control, due to emotion (as in a crime of passion) or mental illness. Similarly, in the many examples of intergroup violence we've considered, blame is central. And because these more public acts draw citizens' attention, politicians and their most partisan followers attempt to frame them in ways that are consistent with a worldview they hope to advance. Sometimes the goal is to gain support for retribution likely to result in the loss of more lives; sometimes it is to preserve gun rights or to alter them. Because such actions have major implications, it is essential that the electorate thinks critically about the framing of blame.

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6

Blame in the Age of Donald Trump

It seemed the entire world was in shock after Donald J. Trump won the 2016 election. Nearly all the pundits had failed to predict the outcome, with Hillary Clinton almost universally favored to win. Though Trump's supporters were euphoric, the rest of the nation and much of the international community were simply horrified. The media were rife with alarming statements about what his victory might mean. For example, the *New York Times* editorial board wrote:

> We know Mr. Trump is the most unprepared president-elect in modern history. We know that by words and actions, he has shown himself to be temperamentally unfit to lead a diverse nation of 320 million people. We know he has threatened to prosecute and jail his political opponents, and he has said he would curtail the freedom of the press. We know he lies without compunction.[1]

The article continued by listing many of the anticipated outcomes of his new administration, such as the likelihood that he would walk away from international agreements that keep the world safer and that open prejudice toward women and people of color as well as abject cruelty

G. Sahar, *Blame and Political Attitudes*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-20236-0_6

toward immigrants, which already appeared to be heightened by his campaign, would become normative under his rule. With the benefit of hindsight, we know that these predictions were not hyperbole; they all turned out to be accurate. In fact, Donald Trump did much more damage to our democracy than his critics feared.

How did he pull it off? Specifically, how could a wealthy real estate tycoon and former reality TV star with no political experience, and, to put it mildly, a checkered personal history, manage to defeat one of the most experienced and qualified presidential candidates in history? Though the answer to that question is complex, one of the factors Trump had going for him was a remarkable ability to avoid responsibility for mistakes and to project blame onto whomever or whatever would serve his needs. Of course, he needed an audience who would buy what he was selling, and at this particular moment in history, he had one. Let us consider how the personality and methods of Trump appealed to the particular motives and characteristics of his followers. Then, we can examine how he strategically placed blame for the nation's problems to win the election and continue garnering support despite many catastrophic errors on his part.

The Psychology of Donald J. Trump

Dan McAdams, respected scholar of personality development, begins his psychological portrait of Donald Trump as follows: "The strangest thing about the story of Donald Trump is that *there is no story*."[2] McAdams' work focuses on how individuals narrate their life stories. He holds that such narration begins early in life and is central to our existence as human beings. This narrative identity is organized around our beliefs and values, making our life stories coherent and meaningful. Our narratives are not just a sequence of events but rather a way of making sense of our existence. How do we explain and interpret the key scenes in our lives? What did we take from them that influenced future decisions? What moral lessons have we learned?

For example, in an earlier book about George W. Bush, McAdams argues that Bush's narrative of his life followed an arc of redemption, a particularly popular storyline for Americans.[3] Bush was a child of

privilege who lost his way in early adulthood, had some professional failures, developed a drinking problem, and then quit drinking, found religion, and turned his life around. As we all know, he went on to become the president of the US. Whether you voted for Bush or not, you recognize this as a coherent story that likely gives meaning to the narrator's life.

According to McAdams, Donald Trump has no such story to tell, which is highly unusual. Trump is extraverted, and he talks a lot, but what he says does not reveal a narrative identity. In fact, McAdams calls him "the episodic man," for whom life is a series of episodes without any coherent link between them or any meaning to be derived from them. It's as though he is inventing himself anew in each situation he encounters. This, according to McAdams, is why he is so unpredictable and was described as such by those who worked for him in the oval office. It also helps to explain why his positions on issues have shifted so dramatically over his lifespan; having once identified as a pro-choice Democrat,[4] Trump governed as a far-right Republican whose Supreme Court appointees have now overturned *Roe v. Wade*, which guaranteed the right to an abortion.

McAdams suggests that Trump's philosophy of life can be encapsulated in a quote he provided for an article in *People* magazine: "Man is the most vicious of all animals, and life is a series of battles ending in victory or defeat."[5] Trump appears to navigate his life in this way, as one battle after another, each one to be fought and won, without even conceiving of the bigger war of which they are a part, not to mention allowing for the possibility of intervals of peace. McAdams argues that Trump viewed his election as something to be won, rather than a step toward becoming president. It was always just about winning.

Where did this obsession with winning come from? Both McAdams and Mary Trump, a clinical psychologist and Donald's niece, suggest that his father Fred was the likely source.[6] They both describe Fred as a tough and demanding father who valued monetary success over all else. According to Mary Trump, he was in fact a cruel sociopath with a deep need for recognition. She believes that it was the father's need for recognition that caused him to financially support Donald through failure after failure. After it became clear to Fred that his eldest son, his namesake who was called Freddy, was not going to achieve greatness in the real estate industry, he set his sights on Donald and supported him no matter what.

Though Donald cultivated the image of an extremely successful real estate tycoon, his business ventures were more characterized by failure than success, with multiple bankruptcies and staggering debt. Without his father's fortune, he likely never would have achieved anything, though he has represented himself as a self-made man. The important thing was that he *appeared* to be successful and thus shined light on Fred. After Fred, Donald continued finding tough guy mentors, such as infamous lawyer, Roy Cohn, and former New York City Mayor, Rudy Giuliani. They propped him up just as his father had, no matter what he had done.

Mary Trump suggests that because Donald never faced consequences for any of his misdeeds, as a child and then as an adult, he never learned to become accountable. Rather, he developed a skill for blaming others for any bad situation. The myth was always more important than the reality.

And there were so many myths! There were the myths about himself, his status as a superrich salesman who could close any deal and always won. And there were myths he created about others, such as the myth Trump cultivated that Barack Obama was not born in the US, starting the so-called birther movement.[7] Some of the many myths he perpetuated during his presidency and after it ended will be considered shortly. The important point here is that, though you may believe that all or most politicians lie, there is evidence that Donald Trump makes the rest of them look like amateurs. The list of lies is too extensive to cover here, but suffice it to say he seems to have been lying more often than he was telling the truth.[8] McAdams suggests that this tendency derives in part from Trump's episodic existence. If you see life as a series of discreet battles, your job is to do what is necessary to win in the moment of each such battle. When one is freed of having to tell a coherent story of one's life and unconstrained by the possibility of facing any consequences, the lies become meaningless and harmless to the self (because in a way, there is no self). Why his followers, who have certainly had to confront the fact that much of what Trump says has been proven false, continue to be believers, is another story, one that I will address.

Another important element of Trump's personality is aggressiveness. Both Mary Trump and Dan McAdams explain that Donald was socialized by his father to be a "killer." Fred Trump saw this as a positive term.

The world was divided, in the minds of both Donald and his father, into winners and losers. Winners are aggressive and take no prisoners. Helped along by an apparent lack of empathy, both men wanted to win at all costs and grind their adversaries under their heels. Not surprisingly, McAdams points out that Trump sees the world as a very dangerous place. And if one lives in an extremely dangerous world, one must be tough and aggressive to survive.

Trump's aggressive approach is likely related to another deep tendency: he frames the world in "us against them" terms. Who is the "us"? Trump's base was composed of mostly white, older rather than younger, more male than female, more rural than urban, less educated, and religious, particularly fundamentalist and evangelical Christians. There were, of course, others who were wealthy and more educated who likely voted for him in the interest of lower taxes. Who is the "them"? Well, there were many "thems," and displacing blame onto those groups was one of Trump's most effective strategies for firing up the "us." Let us now consider what is known about Trump's ingroup.

The Psychology of Trump Supporters

Although Hillary Clinton won the popular vote in the 2016 election, almost 63 million Americans voted for Donald Trump.[9] It would be foolish to suggest that such a large segment of the American population is a monolith that can be described with a few psychological characteristics. As we will consider, there are subgroups of Trump voters that differ from each other in various ways. And of course, there are differences in degree, such as among those who were mildly supportive of him compared to those that voted for him with great enthusiasm. I will try to capture some of the diversity of this very large population, but I hope you will forgive some broad brushstrokes aimed at capturing the most consistent and significant elements that characterize Trump supporters. My goal is not to pathologize Trump voters but rather to illuminate why his unique approach to politics might have resonated with them.

Probably the most commonly discussed psychological characteristic of Trump supporters, in both the popular media and in the research

literature, is authoritarianism. *The Authoritarian Personality*, the book from which the concept was taken, was published in 1950 by four social scientists, Theodore Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel Levinson, and R. Nevitt Sanford, seeking to explain how Nazism was able to flourish in Germany.[10] Though some of the authors' methods and conclusions have been criticized, it was nonetheless a truly groundbreaking book in political psychology. Their basic premise, based largely on Freud's psychoanalytic theory, was that a particular personality structure can make one more susceptible to fascism. In articles using the concept of authoritarianism, one rarely reads the words of the original authors:

> Fascism, in order to be successful as a political movement, must have a mass basis. It must secure not only the frightened submission but the active cooperation of the great majority of the people. Since by its very nature it favors the few at the expense of the many, it cannot possibly demonstrate that it will so improve the situation of most people that their real interests will be served. It must therefore make its major appeal, not to rational self-interest, but to emotional needs—often to the most primitive and irrational wishes and fears. If it be argued that fascist propaganda fools people into believing that their lots will be improved, then the question arises: Why are they so easily fooled? Because, it may be supposed, of their personality structure; because of long-established patterns of hopes and aspirations, fears and anxieties that dispose them to certain beliefs and make them resistant to others. The task of fascist propaganda, in other words, is rendered easier to the degree that antidemocratic potentials already exist in the great mass of people.[11]

In their extensive series of interviews and surveys, Adorno and his colleagues examined this antidemocratic potential in American participants. The authoritarian personality profile they developed included a number of elements, such as a rigid adherence to conventional middle-class values, an exaggerated deference to authority figures (termed "authoritarian submission"), a desire to punish those who violate traditional values (termed "authoritarian aggression"), holding superstitious beliefs, preoccupation with power and toughness, a cynical view of human nature, and a perception of the world as a dangerous place. Though most current measures of authoritarianism do not include all of these elements, they capture the

general personality profile that the authors proposed. The original goal of the project was to understand anti-Semitism, but this personality profile is strongly related to prejudice toward outgroups of many types.

Over the many years since the publication of *The Authoritarian Personality*, researchers have examined a number of aspects of the theory and measurement of the syndrome. Though there is debate about how it originates, whether it is a personality syndrome or an ideology, whether it is unique to right-leaning individuals, and how it is best assessed, the general construct has held up very well. The most well-known and currently utilized revision of the theory and its measurement is Bob Altemeyer's Right Wing Authoritarianism (RWA).[12] Altemeyer's version suggests three main components: (1) submission to "strong" or charismatic leaders, (2) aggression against deviants and "weak" scapegoats, and (3) the holding of traditional, conventional views about politics and morality. Altemeyer also developed a widely used scale to measure them.

Numerous studies have documented a strong relationship between authoritarianism and voting for Donald Trump.[13] This finding undoubtedly does not surprise you, as the list of characteristics of the originally proposed syndrome sounds as though it could describe the results of Trump's personality assessment! A related construct, Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), has also been found to be associated with support of Trump.[14] Those high in SDO prefer a societal hierarchy in which higher-status groups dominate over lower-status ones and tend not to endorse equality as a goal. RWA and SDO have also been shown to predict voting for far-right candidates in European studies.[15]

Interestingly, however, not all aspects of RWA and SDO are correlated with voting for Trump. Though Trump supporters in general are higher than Democrats on authoritarian submission, authoritarian conventionalism, and rejection of egalitarianism, these characteristics do not distinguish between Republicans who supported Trump from those who didn't according to a series of studies conducted by Jake Womick and colleagues:[16]

> Instead, individuals who backed Donald Trump during the Republican primaries and the general election in 2016 were significantly more likely to exhibit group-based dominance and authoritarian aggression than backers of other Republican candidates. That is, compared to other Republicans,

they were especially likely to believe that: "Some groups of people are simply inferior to other groups"; "What our country needs instead of more 'civil rights' is a good stiff dose of law and order"; "Some groups of people must be kept in their place"; and "What our country really needs is a strong, determined President which will crush the evil and set us in our right way again." These results are broadly consistent with media reports concerning the hostile behavior of Trump supporters at campaign events throughout the 2015–2016 primary season, including popular chants such as "Build a wall—kill them all!" and "Lock her up!"

The results of this study are important because they help to distinguish the characteristics most common to Republicans in general from the characteristics of a pro-Trump voter. Specifically, Trump supporters are more likely to endorse aggression against outgroups. This is a meaningful distinction, particularly in the current moment in history when nuance seems to so often be lost in favor of demonizing one position or another. The hard-core Trump supporter is not a garden variety conservative. Other research has shown that Trump supporters also describe themselves as considerably more conservative than other Republicans do.[17]

In addition to authoritarianism and a high social dominance orientation, political psychologist Thomas Pettigrew suggests three other factors that are common to Trump supporters: prejudice, lack of contact with other groups, and relative deprivation.[18] Let's consider each in turn.

Given the strong association of authoritarianism with prejudice, it is not surprising that pro-Trump individuals tend to score higher on measures of modern racism (which is similar to the symbolic racism measure discussed in Chap. 4). It is important to note that the use of racial animus by Republicans is not new. A number of Republican candidates have been accused of employing "dog whistle" politics to elicit racial fear and anger over the years.[19] Recall the thinly veiled racist appeals used to play on associations between race and crime, such as George H. W. Bush's Willie Horton ad in 1988.[20] This ad, which attempted to portray the Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis as soft on crime, showed a picture of a convicted criminal named William Horton, a Black man, and described his rape of a white woman and stabbing of her boyfriend while he was out on furlough. At the time, the ad did not seem subtle, and there was great outrage about the obvious attempt to use racism to

undermine Dukakis. However, it pales in comparison to Trump's method, which is simply to identify members of some groups as criminals. Such appeals would seemingly require a degree of racial hostility to be deemed acceptable by Trump's followers.

As Pettigrew's work has demonstrated, one of the most important ways of reducing prejudice is positive intergroup contact, which tends to reduce intergroup fear and raise the level of empathy for the other group.[21] Some research suggests that white Trump supporters were more likely to live in areas in which they had little contact with minority group members.[22] According to researchers, Jonathan Rothwell and Pablo Diego-Rosell:

> The analysis provides clear evidence that those who view Trump favorably are disproportionately living in racially and culturally isolated zip codes and commuting zones. Holding other factors constant, support for Trump is highly elevated in areas with few college graduates and in neighborhoods that standout within the larger commuting zone for being white, segregated enclaves, with little exposure to blacks, Asians, and Hispanics.[23]

Being high in racism and living in an area in which one has little chance of positive interactions with outgroup members means that there will be no reason for changing one's view, particularly if the messages about outgroups one is exposed to are largely negative. Thus, it makes sense that lack of intergroup contact is an important variable in predicting support for Trump.

As some readers may recall, immediately after Trump's surprise victory in 2016, many pundits were attributing his win to disgruntled working-class voters.[24] The storyline didn't sound outrageous: white working-class Americans were tired of not being able to get ahead economically, distressed by the loss of jobs to other countries, and were voting based on their pocketbooks. As we considered in Chap. 2, many social scientists have endorsed the idea that people vote in line with their economic self-interest. However, the data that have since been collected by a number of researchers do not support this conclusion. In fact, studies suggest that if economic status were a predictor of voting for Trump, it is in the opposite direction than had been assumed: Trump voters are more affluent than

the average American.[25] These studies also document that the Trump voter is on average less threatened by the exporting of American jobs to other countries (because they tend to have occupations that are relatively protected from this possibility) and less likely to be unemployed. So much for that theory!

So, what is going on? Perhaps you recall from Chap. 1 the idea that social psychologists generally believe that what people perceive to be true may be more important than what actually is true. That is, perception is more important than reality in terms of our attitudes, emotions, and behaviors. The case of Trump voters provides evidence for this claim. What seems to matter is not whether one really is disadvantaged by the current system but rather whether one perceives herself to be disadvantaged. In the words of Thomas Pettigrew, "Trump adherents feel deprived relative to what they expected to possess at this point in their lives and relative to what they erroneously perceive other 'less deserving' groups have acquired."[26] This feeling that one's group is not advancing as much as other groups is called "relative deprivation." Consistent with the relative deprivation theory, two of the strong predictors of support for Trump, according to one study, were feeling that the American way of life was threatened and that high-status groups face more discrimination than low-status groups.[27] Just to be clear, this would mean believing that men face more discrimination than women, white Americans more than Black Americans, and Christians more than Muslims. Thus, Trump supporters are not responding so much to true economic disadvantage but rather the feeling that they are not getting what they deserve, and that undeserving groups are getting more than they should.

An extensive study by Emily Ekins aimed at teasing apart different types of Trump voters suggests that in spite of the general characteristics just discussed, these voters do not all endorse the same values or policies.[28] In fact, she found evidence for five unique clusters of Trump voters and reported that these types hold different views on immigration, race, economics, and so on. For example, a group she calls "staunch conservatives" tend to be economically conservative but less concerned about racial issues, whereas "American preservationists" are economically progressive but deeply concerned about race and hold negative attitudes toward minority group members. Some voters were motivated by

enthusiasm for Trump, whereas others were voting against Hillary Clinton. However, Ekins did find four commonalities among all the subgroups of Trump voters that differentiates them from other voters: an intense dislike of Hillary Clinton, support for a temporary ban on Muslim immigration, harsher views on illegal immigration, and a feeling that their personal financial situation has worsened. Three of these four fit nicely with the characteristics just discussed. Specifically, anti-immigrant views are easily associated with authoritarian tendencies, prejudice, and a feeling that the government is helping the less deserving (relative deprivation); a negative view of personal finances might also be linked to the perception of relative deprivation. The one element that does not clearly fit is dislike of Hillary Clinton; we will take that issue up in the next section. The important point is that Trump voters, though they share some characteristics in common, are not a monolith. It appears that people supported Trump for a variety of reasons.

In sum, what we now know of the psychology of Trump voters is that they tend to be higher in authoritarianism (especially authoritarian aggression) and social dominance orientation, higher in prejudice, lower in opportunities for intergroup contact, and higher in the perception that they are not getting what they deserve in American society (in terms of both personal finances and ingroup status, which they perceive to be threatened by minority groups), opposed to Muslim and illegal immigration, and disapproving of Hillary Clinton. Let us now turn our attention to how Trump's campaign and governing style fit with the values and concerns of his supporters.

Trump's Use of Blame During the Campaign: Mexican Immigrants, "Radical Islam," Obama, and "Crooked Hillary"

Who could forget Donald Trump's cornerstone campaign promise before the 2016 election? He repeatedly talked about building his "big beautiful wall" protecting the US border with Mexico. Why? Because he blamed Mexicans for taking jobs away from American citizens and, worse, being

responsible for high crime rates. He made these comments in a speech he gave on June 16, 2015, to announce his candidacy for the Republican nomination:

> When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're not sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.[29]

Trump also frequently railed about the threat of Islam as in this quote from a speech he gave in New Hampshire on June 13, 2016, the day after an American Muslim carried out a mass shooting at an Orlando gay nightclub:

> Hillary Clinton's catastrophic immigration plan will bring vastly more radical Islamic immigration into this country, threatening not only our society but our entire way of life. When it comes to radical Islamic terrorism, ignorance is not bliss. Its deadly—totally deadly.[30]

Trump was always quick to point out such incidents, but when Muslim Americans were victims of terrorism, he remained silent.[31] A systematic analysis of Trump's rhetoric in his many tweets about Muslims revealed a clear pattern.[32] The authors summarize their findings:

> This study has concluded that Trump restores his anti-Muslim rhetoric both before the presidential election of America (2016) and after to reinforce the shared conception of American identity with his people. The researchers have investigated that Trump uses sweeping statements to construct the identity of refugees and immigrants as criminals or as a threat to America and its citizens. The researchers have also concluded that Trump intentionally uses a dehumanizing perspective for Muslims to create a façade that Muslims are invading America and measures have to be taken against them. In doing so, Trump successfully portrays himself as the American hero, who wishes to save America from suffering and destruction.[33]

As they point out, Trump capitalized on aspects of Islam, such as Shariah law, that are relatively unfamiliar to most Americans. He suggests

that Shariah law is inherently oppressive to women and anti-gay. Importantly, he argues that the US must keep Muslim immigrants out as they are violent criminals, ready to wage a holy war on the country. The authors further note that Trump's Islamophobic tweets often managed to simultaneously insult Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, by suggesting they were soft on immigration and sympathetic to Islam.

Whatever one thinks of Trump, he certainly exceled in creating, or perhaps just enhancing, a strong "us versus them" dynamic in his audience. Imagine how these inflammatory statements played with individuals high in authoritarian aggression and prejudice, who believe strongly that some groups should have higher status than others and that white Americans are being disadvantaged relative to minority group members. On top of fanning anger, he also used fear of immigrants (especially from Latin American and predominantly Islamic countries) to convince American citizens that they needed a protector, namely him, who would use any means necessary to keep the country safe from these violent hooligans, thereby making America great again.

I have been focusing on the psychology of Trump voters in terms of their personality characteristics and attitudes toward outgroups, however, there are also societal factors that may have made Trump's campaign message particularly appealing to some Americans. In its 2015 report, the US Census Bureau predicted that minority group members will outnumber majority group members by 2044.[34] Thus, white Americans will no longer be a majority, though they will still be a plurality. What is the effect of this fact on a country that has always clung to strict categories of race and ethnicity and has a long history of white supremacism? Research suggests that this trend is perceived as threatening by some white Americans.

In one interesting series of experiments, Maureen Craig and Jennifer Richeson[35] found that making the trend salient to participants, by merely having them read a brief statement about it, was associated with a heightened feeling of white status threat (e.g., feeling that the American way of life is threatened). In addition, once exposed to this threat, respondents who were not politically affiliated leaned more toward the Republican party, and respondents, regardless of party affiliation, endorsed more conservative policies. Thus, there is evidence that the threat of no longer being in the majority caused these participants to move to the right

politically. Perhaps you recall that the threat posed by 9/11 had a similar effect on Americans. These studies documented that not only does the threat of terrorism cause people to lean more toward conservative, social status threats do as well. Simply thinking briefly about the loss of a white majority causes some people to endorse conservative policies. Why do I bring this up? It seems plausible that Trump's "us versus them" campaign message might be particularly appealing to individuals who are fearful of losing their position at the top of the societal hierarchy. His hard right positions would be reassuring to them as would his plan to make America great *again*, which implies a return to the good old days.

Add to that the fact that lower- and middle-income Americans in general are struggling financially thanks to increasing income inequality. The wealth gap between the richest and poorest families more than doubled between 1989 and 2016.[36] Furthermore, middle-class incomes have grown more slowly than incomes at the top of the hierarchy for the past five decades. Thus, the feeling that one is not getting what one deserves or expected is not just a fantasy created by Trump and his supporters. It is understandable that many Americans feel that the current system is not serving them well. Predictably, these same Americans are looking for someone to blame. Blaming outgroups, such as immigrants, Muslims, and Black Americans, offers an explanation for the problem and an outlet for anger and frustration, especially for individuals who harbor prejudice.

Another outlet for blame, however, would be the politicians one holds responsible for the situation. Enter populism, a political ideology that draws on skepticism about establishment politicians.

Much as it seems hard to believe that a wealthy real estate mogul and reality TV star shares the concerns of the average American frustrated by lack of economic mobility and perceived threats to the American way of life, Trump managed to convince many that he was the one to "drain the swamp." He portrayed himself as a political outsider who would not be beholden to establishment politicians or special interests. His rhetoric, again using an "us against them" framing, suggested that he would champion the common person over political elites. In a speech in Manchester, New York, on August 25th, 2016, Trump said:

> Your needs are going to come first. The real divide in this election is not between left and right, but between everyday working people and a corrupt

> political establishment that works only for itself. This election is a chance for the great majority of decent citizens to end the rule of a small group of special interests and to return that power to the voters or, as we would say, to the people. Hillary Clinton believes only in government of, by and for the powerful. I am promising government of, by and for the people.[37]

What is the effect of this populist framing? A recent pair of studies suggests that the main mechanism by which populist rhetoric influences support for populist politicians is blame attribution.[38] The researchers exposed participants to two different types of frames for political problems, which roughly map onto dispositional attributions (suggesting that political actors are to blame) and situational attributions (which blame events and circumstances). The results demonstrated that the dispositional blame frame was associated with more populist attitudes and support for populist candidates than was the frame that blamed circumstances. Throughout his campaign for president, Trump used the blame frame to suggest that Hillary Clinton and sometimes Barack Obama were responsible for many current societal problems, and to paint Clinton in particular as unethical and out for her own interest. Whether or not Trump understood that calling his opponent "Crooked Hillary" and leading crowds in chants to "lock her up" were techniques out of the populist playbook, he certainly demonstrated the power of effectively placing blame on the political establishment. To the shock of many Americans and many in the global community, it seems to have worked.

Trump's Use of Blame During His Presidency: Radical Democrats, Fake News, and China

After taking office, Trump continued to cast blame in every direction but his own. Facing an inability to make good on his campaign promises and a disappointingly low approval rating after his first 100 days in office, Trump blamed the checks and balances in the constitution that make it difficult to get things done.[39] In 2019, he blamed the longest-ever partial shutdown of the government on the "radical left."[40] He blamed "fake news" on a nearly constant basis for everything from political division[41]

to mass shootings[42] to the decline of the American economy.[43] In general, any article or news program that criticized Trump's performance was identified as fake news. But three particular situations stand out in the realm of blame avoidance: the COVID-19 pandemic, Trump's loss of the 2020 election, and the insurrection in the US Capitol that followed.

The World Health Organization declared a global pandemic due to a novel coronavirus called COVID-19 on March 11, 2020. Though there was shock and confusion across the globe, there is general agreement that the US, under Trump's leadership, managed the situation particularly badly.[44] As of this writing, more than a million Americans have died of the virus, over 88 million have contracted it, and more than two years into the pandemic, there is no end in sight.

Amber Philips of the *Washington Post* wrote a piece entitled "Everyone and everything Trump has blamed for his coronavirus response" in which she lists seven different entities that Trump has held responsible.[45] The targets of his blame included China for not doing enough to slow the spread of the virus (he even referred to the virus as the "Chinese virus" or "kung flu"), the Obama administration for regulations he claimed were slowing response measures down, state governors for not doing enough to obtain ventilators, and on and on. So much for the party of personal responsibility. Facing what was certainly the biggest crisis of his presidency, Trump responded by ignoring infectious disease experts, weakening proposed measures for controlling the disease, pushing ineffective treatments, and doing little to secure supplies aimed at reducing the spread, according to a 2021 congressional report.[46] In her testimony, Dr. Deborah Birx, the Covid response coordinator for the White House, stated that the Trump administration's deliberate policy of undermining efforts to control the virus resulted in 130,000 unnecessary deaths in the US. The report is stunning in that it suggests that the Trump administration intentionally placed its own political agenda above saving American lives.

But did Americans blame him? One poll taken in June of 2020 asked respondents to rate Trump's responsibility for the spread on a 10-point scale with 10 representing extremely responsible. Conservatives rated Trump a 4.1, whereas liberals and moderates assigned him a 7.3.[47] Another in early October of the same year also showed a strong partisan divide, with 79% of Democrats and only 38% of Republicans holding

the US government largely responsible.[48] As we have seen, people are more likely to blame a politician from the other party or ideological camp than from one's own. However, the June survey also included a test of participants' response to Trump's efforts to deflect blame onto China by referring to the disease as the "Chinese virus." Though using this term did slightly increases the respondents' blame of Chinese Americans, it did not raise blame ratings of the Chinese government. And interestingly, the use of that term actually increased respondents' blame of Trump; even conservative respondents blamed him more.[49] The authors concluded:

> That suggests that scapegoating ethnic groups might hurt in the short run, creating its own backlash. While Trump's use of that phrase increased Americans' willingness to blame Chinese Americans, it failed to shift blame away from himself.[50]

It is encouraging that, as we discussed in Chap. 2, even the power of partisanship and ideology has its limits. The authors of the study report that the use of the term prompted negative comments by respondents across the ideological spectrum. Another poll in October of 2020 reported that 59% of respondents disapproved of Trump's handling of the pandemic and only 37% approved.[51] Though this survey did not ask about blame specifically, it strongly implies that a majority of Americans held Trump responsible for the weak response, and it was likely a factor in the 2020 election.

Given what a controversial figure President Donald Trump had been, it felt as though citizens of the US and the rest of the world were on the edge of their seats when the 2020 election results began coming in. His opponent, Joe Biden, could hardly have been a more different character, an extremely experienced politician who does not dominate the spotlight and is widely considered to be a moderate Democrat. Trump repeatedly said, prior to election day, that the only way he could lose would be if the election was rigged against him. As we all now know, Biden won both the popular and electoral votes, or at least most people thought so. Rather than concede the election and congratulate his opponent, as is the norm, Trump refused to accept that he'd lost and instead claimed he'd won by a landslide. He famously blamed rampant electoral fraud, refused to

concede, launched a Twitter campaign questioning the results, and proceeded to file dozens of lawsuits contesting the results. Time after time, his efforts were unsuccessful, and Joe Biden was declared the winner.

Unfortunately, many Trump supporters and even rank-and-file Republican politicians continued to refuse to recognize Biden as the victor. A response that will live on in the history books as posing one of the biggest threats to democracy in our nation's history then ensued. On January 6, 2021, when a joint session of congress was to certify Joe Biden's electoral win, thousands of Trump supporters, many belonging to extremist groups, gathered outside the White House to hear their hero speak. Trump vowed never to concede and urged his vice president Mike Pence to refuse to certify the vote and return it to the states. Pence refused. Trump urged the protesters to march to the US Capitol, which they proceeded to do as Trump himself returned to the White House. As the world now knows, the protestors broke into the Capitol as an angry mob of insurrectionists, breaking into the offices, destroying property, aggressing against any Capitol Police officers who got in their way, and creating a terrifying situation of chaos and violence that resulted in several deaths and scores of injuries. Though many inside and outside of Trump's inner circle urged him to do something to stop the mayhem, he refused for hours. He eventually tweeted a video in which he validated the feelings of the insurrectionists but asked them to go home.[52] Later that day, at 6:01 PM, just after the police had managed to secure the Capitol, Trump posted the following message on Twitter:

> These are the things and events that happen when a sacred landslide election victory is so unceremoniously & viciously stripped away from great patriots who have been badly & unfairly treated for so long. Go home with love & in peace. Remember this day forever![53]

Later that night the election was certified, and Joe Biden was declared the winner. The following day, Trump conceded and promised to participate in a peaceful transfer of power. As I write this, the nation is riveted by a series of congressional public hearings aimed at clarifying how this assault on our democracy happened and who was to blame. The testimony presented so far would seem to make it difficult for anyone to see Trump as innocent in the matter.

But, incredibly, Trump continues to claim that the election was stolen and that the insurrectionists were heroes. He refuses to accept responsibility for losing the election, nor will he take the blame for inciting a riot at the Capital. In fact, in an interview with the *Washington Post*, Trump blamed Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the House, for not stopping the insurrection even as he bragged about the size of the crowd he'd drawn.[54]

A poll taken in early June of 2022, just before the hearings began, indicated that about half of Americans (51%) believe Trump was responsible for the insurrection.[55] It also reported that 55% of Americans believe Trump should not run for president again in 2024. It is surprising, given the dramatic testimony in the hearings, much of which is quite damning in regard to Trump's role in the insurrection, that blame of him is not higher. On the other hand, only two in five respondents reported following the results of the hearings. So, is the key to Trump's super power of blame avoidance that he attracts Americans who are simply uniformed? How is it possible that so many citizens would take the word of someone with a long history of dishonesty over the word of many elected officials? Why do so many Americans accept, without question, information that seems totally outlandish to the rest of us? Social science can offer some clues: the unusual bond Trump supporters feel with him, the influence of partisan polarization, the appeal of his simple, nonanalytic language, and the power of conspiracy theories.

Why Do Trump Supporters Not Hold Him Responsible?

There is little doubt that although Donald Trump was new to politics, he was a familiar figure to most Americans long before he ran for president. In addition to being a frequent subject in the tabloids, thanks to his wealth, power, and dramatic personal life, he starred in 14 seasons of the reality shows *The Apprentice* and *Celebrity Apprentice*. It is hard to imagine that his political fortunes were not helped along by having already been a household name in the US. Beyond the fact that the series made him a familiar face, it also likely provided an opportunity for watchers of the show to develop a bond of sorts with Trump. Research by Shira Gabriel

and colleagues[56] suggests that people develop one-sided psychological attachments to media figures, such as celebrities. Though individuals realize these relationships are not real, there is evidence that the bonds can function similarly to those experienced in actual relationships, affecting our thoughts, emotions, and even behaviors. Perhaps you've had the experience of feeling a fondness for certain celebrities or have experienced sadness when a favorite TV series was cancelled. Even if an actor is working from a script, we feel as though we know them. These bonds with celebrity figures are called *parasocial relationships*.

A recent study by these researchers provided evidence that, indeed, the more individuals were exposed to the TV series or other media regarding Trump, the more they developed a parasocial bond with him.[57] Further, the researchers documented:

> That bond with Trump predicted having a positive attitude toward Trump, believing his promises, disregarding his inflammatory statements, and even (self-reported) voting behavior. In addition, these effects were particularly strong for those whose votes were a surprise in the election: people who did not identify with the Republican party.[58]

If you were dismayed that the release of the controversial *Access Hollywood* tape in which Trump bragged about sexually assaulting women did not foil his run for president, as I was, then perhaps the results of this study are illuminating. Just as we may ignore or rationalize negative information about a loved one, we may also do so with a famous person we've never met. And as the authors point out, Trump's role in the series was somewhat presidential and allowed viewers to see him behaving authoritatively and demonstrating his business acumen.

Thus, a positive attachment to Trump likely helped to shield him from blame and was a particularly important factor for those who did not identify as Republicans. On the other side of the coin, it is also likely that some support for Trump in the face of his bad behavior among committed Republicans stemmed less from love of Trump than from hatred of Democrats.

At the beginning of this book, I argued that the degree of political polarization in the US is being exaggerated and that, in fact, most

Americans are moderate pragmatists, as suggested by Morris Fiorina.[59] However, it seems hard to reconcile that argument with the fact that we *feel* so polarized. Social media outlets and political news programs are filled with rage from those on the right and left alike about the other side. Blue state Democrats mock the archaic values of red state Republicans, who in turn paint Democrats as lefty wackos. The degree of animosity between them is palpable. So, how can we NOT be polarized?

Shanto Iyengar and colleagues suggest that Americans are in fact *affectively polarized* more than ideologically polarized.[60] In other words, though Americans may not be very divergent in policy preferences, they experience very strong emotions in regard to their party identification. These authors suggest that party identification is a social identity, just like race, gender, and other group memberships that we carry as part of our self-concept. And as we've discussed quite a bit, these group identities can have powerful effects, such as causing us to favor ingroup members over outgroup members, hold negative stereotypes about the other group, and make ingroup-enhancing attributions. Their results documented that party identity has extremely powerful effects on our cognitions, emotions, and even behavior. In fact, its effects have become even stronger than race. In their studies, which used a variety of different measures of affective polarization, they found that negative emotions toward the outgroup (meaning Democrats' feelings about Republicans and vice versa) were just as high as those across racial categories, and respondents were actually more discriminatory in their behavior based on party than race. And in case you were wondering if the findings were more indicative of ingroup love than outgroup hate, their results suggested the latter to be true! Relatedly, Jonathan Haidt and Marc Hetherington found that though positive emotions toward one's own party have remained relatively constant over the last few decades, hostility toward the other party has increased markedly.[61]

Shanto Iyengar and Sean Westwood, authors of the study comparing cross-party animosity with racial animosity, suggest that in fact individuals might feel freer to express hostility toward the other party than toward another race for a couple of reasons.[62] For one, expressing racial hostility is generally viewed negatively as violating norms of equality. For another, because party is chosen, whereas race is not, individuals might hold

others responsible for their party identity—that is, they can be blamed for it. And as we know, blame for something negative in the eye of the beholder is just a step away from anger.

Given the current emotional strength of party identification, it is not surprising that so many strongly identified Republicans refuse to blame Trump. It would be siding with the enemy. Better to blame Democrats for supposedly stealing the election, a determination that would be much less threatening to their partisan identity. That is a sad commentary indeed about the state of American politics.

Finally, it is not possible to explain the attraction Trump holds for some voters without considering how he talks to them. As anyone who followed politics during Trump's campaign and during his presidency knows, he spoke in a simple and direct way. Comedians mocked his unsophisticated language and inarticulate manner of speaking; however, some Americans clearly appreciated his style of communication. More than once, I recall hearing that people liked that "he would say what no one else would say." Indeed, his uncensored way of speaking off the cuff was one of the things some Americans liked.[63] As much as Trump seemed to mark a complete departure from prior American presidents, there is evidence that, at least in regard to speaking style, he was actually the next step in a long continuum. Kayla Jordan and colleagues conducted an in-depth analysis of Trump's use of language in comparison to past presidents.[64] They suggest that Trump's language demonstrated a low level of analytic thinking and a high level of confidence. That is, he spoke in simple (rather than complex), direct ways with great certainty. It turns out that the language of American presidents in general over the course of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first has shown decreases in analytic thinking and increases in confidence. This finding applies internationally as well, but the trend is particularly strong in the US. Thus, Trump, though he may have exceeded his predecessors on these aspects of language, was not as much of an outlier as many thought. What is the effect of this type of political communication style? The authors suggest:

> Taken together, the trends discovered in this research suggest that voters may increasingly be drawn to leaders who can make difficult, complex problems easier to understand with intuitive, confident answers. The find-

> ings confirm that President Trump and leaders like him did not emerge out of nowhere but rather, that they are the most recent incarnation of long-term political trends (at least when it comes to the traits measured in this study).[65]

It makes intuitive sense that in an increasingly complex world some individuals might prefer a leader that can make things simple. In addition, the projection of confidence as well as the informality of his addresses to the public could well have increased their trust in him as "one of us" and decreased their motivation to think critically about his words and actions. Perhaps that is why so many accepted statements that turned out to be myths and why some of the conspiracy theories floated during his campaign and presidency seemed believable.

Trump was not the first politician to use conspiracy theories to influence the public, but he certainly relied on them more than most. To name just a few examples, Trump suggested that Obama was not born in the US and that he supported the terrorist group ISIS; that both Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden might be murderers; and that the father of Republican opponent Ted Cruz was involved in the Kennedy assassination.[66] A *New York Times* report documented 145 retweets posted by Trump that furthered bizarre conspiracy theories, such as that Democrats were running a pedophile sex trafficking ring out of a Washington D.C. pizza parlor.[67] We cannot know whether Trump believed these theories, but it's worth considering why he used them and what the effect was.

Zhiying (Bella) Ren and colleagues suggest that conspiracy theories serve several functions for politicians.[68] First, they can be used to attack political opponents. Because conspiracy theories tend to arouse strong emotions, the authors suggest that they impede careful cognitive processing. When individuals are extremely angry, they are less likely to be able to think rationally, making it more likely that they will accept even an outlandish theory as true. Second, these theories can serve to galvanize the politician's followers. Conspiracy theories often depict in evil person or group of people who are engaging in immoral activities, which the politician holds in opposition to the pure and true ingroup who condemns such behavior. Thus, there is an us-against-them dynamic set up, which strengthens the bonds among ingroup members and reinforces

their attachment to the virtuous leader. Third, and most relevant to our topic, conspiracy theories can be used to deflect blame from the politician and place it on the person or group accused of wrongdoing. The authors point out that this method of blame displacement is especially effective when powerful people are suggested to be carrying out evil acts. Because they are so powerful, they can do these things without being caught; therefore, these theories are impossible to prove or disprove. When the target attempts to disprove the fantastical claims against them, they are accused of perpetrating a cover-up. Fourth, and finally, conspiracy theories can undermine democratic institutions. Why would a politician want to delegitimize an institution of which he is a part? He might wish to do so if that institution threatens his power. And when democratic institutions are no longer trusted, the politician's followers are more likely to engage in action, even violence, against that institution.

This framework fits remarkably well with the effects of Trump's ultimate conspiracy theory: that the election was stolen. The tweet I quoted earlier could not be clearer that evil forces are stealing the election and victimizing Trump and his patriotic and moral followers. And no matter what those in charge of the electoral process said, he and his followers refused to believe that the process was not rigged. There seemed to be no way to definitively disprove their claims. And ultimately, Trump escaped blame for having lost the election in the eyes of his faithful followers and was able to shift it entirely to corrupt politicians.

In summary, Donald Trump had spent his life, long before running for president, avoiding blame. Having never developed a coherent life narrative, he navigated the world moment by moment, never worrying about the effects of his actions, nor facing their consequences. His aggressive us-against-them view of the world, developed early in life, proved useful in appealing to many Americans who were high in prejudice and wanted to punish the outgroups (such as Mexican and Muslim immigrants and minorities) they blamed for threatening the American way of life they held dear. Trump was skilled not only in blaming marginalized groups but also in using populist rhetoric to convince his followers that establishment politicians were not merely blameworthy but evil and corrupt and should be locked up. Many of his supporters, due to their bond with Trump, their hatred of the other party, their attraction to his simplistic explanations of

American problems, and the energizing and validating conspiracy theories that portrayed them and their leader as heroes, continued to believe him. These are only some of the factors that likely propelled Trump to the most powerful position in the world and may perhaps put him there again.

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7

Blame, Ideology, and Reason for Hope

"Why Blame?" Revisited

Why does blame figure so prominently in our personal and political lives? That is, why do many human beings spend so much cognitive energy on holding others responsible for such a wide variety of problems? Well before psychologists were examining these questions, philosophers, at least from the time of Aristotle, were theorizing about them. For example, nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche wrote about the related issue of free will. Free will, the idea that we have agency over our actions, is a requirement for holding someone responsible. If the individual could not have done otherwise, meaning he did not have control over his actions, he will be held less responsible. Thus, free will is required for one to be blamed. Nietzsche, who held little stock in the idea of free will, wrote:

> Wherever responsibilities are sought, it is usually the instinct for *wanting to punish and judge* that is doing the searching. Becoming is stripped of its innocence once any state if affairs is traced back to a will, to intentions, to responsible acts: the doctrine of the will was fabricated essentially for the purpose of punishment, i.e., of *wanting to find guilty*.[1]

G. Sahar, *Blame and Political Attitudes*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-20236-0_7

Thus, Nietzsche suggests that people have a motive to judge and punish others for transgressions and that the idea of free will was created to allow us to satisfy that desire. This argument fits well with one of the concepts we began with, the idea that human beings act as judges who evaluate the actions of others in order to reward or punish them. There is now empirical evidence supporting Nietzsche's contention that we endorse the concept of free will, at least in part, to judge and punish others.

Cory Clark and colleagues conducted a series of five studies aimed at explaining why the belief in the idea of free will is so strong and prevalent.[2] Using a variety of research methodologies, they demonstrated that people more strongly endorse free will when they are motivated to punish an individual for a moral transgression. For example, in one experiment, they found that participants indicated a stronger belief in free will after reading about a person robbing a house than a person taking cans out of a recycling bin to sell for money. The authors suggest that being able to punish individuals who commit immoral acts is essential to a functioning society. Because human beings are social creatures and rely on other group members, it is critical that they are held accountable for wrongdoings so that harmful acts are not repeated.

Contemporary American philosopher George Sher, in his book *In Praise of Blame*,[3] similarly argues that blame has gotten an undeserved bad name in American society. Beyond the utilitarian argument that blame of others and associated emotions and actions can act as a deterrent to wrongdoing, Sher suggests that to believe in a moral principle and be committed to it means that we must hold each other accountable for violating that principle. Because moral principles are considered to apply not just to oneself, but to everyone, to uphold the principle is to hold others accountable. To hold others accountable involves blaming them, at least for those from Western cultures. And only if one's reaction is sufficiently unpleasant will it function as a deterrent of future moral violations. He laments the current suggestion that society would be better off without blame. On the other hand, Sher concludes his book with these comments:

> It is one thing to say that living a fully moral life requires blaming those who ignore or flout morality's demands, but quite another to say that it requires the kind of toxic anger that makes future harmony more difficult to achieve. That we would be better off if we were to weaken the connection between blame and rancor may be the kernel of truth in the anti-blame ideology, but that we would be better off if we abandoned blame itself is the larger falsehood in which that kernel is embedded.[4]

Thus, Sher suggests that though we might tone down our emotional reactions to wrongdoings, we should not eliminate blame, nor would we likely be able to eliminate a reaction that is so deeply embedded in our psychology.

I tend to agree with Sher that blame is necessary and serves an important function in society: holding others accountable for wrong or harmful acts. I also think he raises a very good point in suggesting that the emotional reactions associated with blame could use to be dialed back. When holding someone accountable turns into villainizing the individual, it is not always clear that justice has been served, nor that the accused person has learned something from the attack on their character.

"Cancel Culture"

This discussion about the necessity of blame for holding others accountable relates to a current controversy over "cancel culture." The term generally refers to the public shaming and perhaps boycotting of individuals who say or do offensive things. But interestingly Americans do not define it the same way. Whereas liberals are more likely to define cancel culture as a way of holding others accountable, calling it "accountability culture" or "consequence culture,"[5] conservatives see it as a form of censorship.[6] There seem to be nearly weekly examples of celebrities as well as formerly unknown individuals who say or do something offensive and end up splashed across social media. Oftentimes, the controversy is over a recent event, such as author J.K. Rowling's anti-trans remarks[7] or the now famous story of Amy Cooper, a white woman who unjustifiably called the police on Christian Cooper, a Black man who was birdwatching in

Central Park,[8] but sometimes the accusations relate to an action that took place much earlier, such as the discovery that Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau wore blackface at a performance in high school and brownface to appear to be an Arab for a costume party in 2001.[9]

Every time one of these events occurs, it seems to spur another debate about whether the outrage is appropriate or overblown. Conservative news media blame hysterical "wokeness," whereas the liberal media lament that so many of our citizens still harbor deep prejudice. Clearly, the reactions are related to blame, which is particularly apparent when the speech or event was from the past. There is disagreement about whether someone can be blamed for doing something they didn't know was racist, sexist, or offensive in some way. Can we be held responsible if we didn't know something was wrong at the time? Alternatively stated, do we have a responsibility to educate ourselves on what is wrong, or is it enough to simply say, "I didn't know."

There are positive aspects to drawing attention to inappropriate statements or conduct and being able to hold individuals accountable, and those who participate do seem to feel they are fighting for justice.[10] In addition, the ability to call out behavior that harms marginalized groups is putting some power into the hands of people (and their allies) who have in sense been "cancelled" by society for centuries.

However, there are also downsides to this manner of punishment, most of which takes place on Twitter. Leaving aside the fact that the extreme anger expressed in the remarks does not invite civil dialog, there is a bigger problem. The tweets generally serve to individualize the problems of prejudice.[11] Expressing our outrage on Twitter about a particular individual might be cathartic but it also suggests that racism and other forms of prejudice represent an individual problem rather than a societal one. Exclusively blaming the individual lets society off the hook. An analysis of the discourse in these tweets suggests that they focus on what is wrong with this person and take a dualistic good versus evil approach, with the accused represented as despicable and those calling the person out as moral.[12] And as you may recall, Critical Race Theory and other contemporary theories about systemic racism hold that it is embedded in our society in ways that are often invisible to us, but embedded nonetheless. Therefore, societal structures need to change to eliminate racism.

Going at the problem individual by individual is not only inefficient, but it likely makes people think they are doing something about racism when they are merely chipping off a tiny piece of a much bigger problem. I fire off an angry tweet and feel that I did my part to fight racism, but in fact, I merely contributed one more comment condemning a biased individual, doing little to address the larger issue.

What I am trying to suggest here is that a 280-character angry tweet might not be the best way to influence how people view societal problems such as racism. In short order, I will suggest some better methods for changing these views, but before that, let's briefly revisit the influence of ideology.

A Few More Words on Ideology and Blame

My goal in this book was to illustrate the significant role of blame in our political lives, which, I argue, is often lost in favor of focusing exclusively on political ideology. The focus on ideology is particularly strong at the present moment, with many issues being discussed in terms of right-left or red-blue differences. There is no doubt that political ideology is having a heyday, spurring many articles and books about political polarization that largely indicate that drastically different worldviews are separating Americans into two extreme political camps. However, though it is true that politicians themselves and political pundits have moved farther apart in terms of policy preferences, there is evidence that most regular citizens are moderate pragmatists rather than ideological zealots.[13]

Granted, there is empirical support for affective polarization, characterized by a high level of hostility toward the other party, suggesting that partisanship has become a powerful social identity, and we increasingly prefer members of our own political group. And there is strong evidence that worldviews, such as political ideology, religiosity, and patriotism, do seem to lead people to perceive the causes of social problems differently. As we've considered, conservatives are more likely than liberals to hold the poor responsible for poverty, women responsible for unwanted pregnancy, and Black Americans responsible for their lower financial status.

Those high in blind patriotism place blame for hatred of the US on the haters themselves rather than on American foreign policy.

However, lest you are left with the impression that those right of center are always holding others more blameworthy, we should consider situations in which liberals hold individuals more responsible than do conservatives. In one series of studies, G. Scott Morgan, Elizabeth Mullen, and Linda Skitka demonstrated that when it is consistent with their values, conservatives make situational attributions (blaming the situation rather than the individual) more than do liberals.[14] Specifically, they found that conservatives tended to make situational attributions in response to American Marines accused of killing Iraqi civilians and police officers accused of wrongly killing a cougar running lose in Chicago. These important findings demonstrate that those who lean to the right do not exclusively make internal, controllable attributions (blaming the person); they only do so when that explanation is consistent with their values. In regard to both scenarios, they found evidence that conservatives' responses were related to security values (measured by importance of national security, respect for authority, supporting the officers, etc.). To hold the Marines and the police less personally responsible was consistent with those security values.

In addition, an earlier series of studies by Linda Skitka and colleagues documented that liberals and conservatives do not differ in their propensity to make dispositional attributions for politically neutral situations.[15] They also provided evidence that even in politically relevant situations liberals and conservatives initially make similar attributions, but then liberals amend those attributions to make them consistent with their values. Participants in one interview study were responding to a question about whether the government should subsidize incomes to give citizens a reasonable standard of living. They found that though both liberals and conservatives tended to begin by making dispositional attributions for why people might or might not need assistance, liberals tended to correct that initial reaction by secondarily endorsing situational attributions. Another study in the series presented scenarios of AIDS patients in need of subsidized care. Participants in general allocated less help to those who were deemed more responsible for their situations, as attribution theory would predict. However, they found that liberals endorsed more support

for those who were perceived as responsible only if they had the cognitive resources to adjust their responses. If they were instead kept cognitively busy by performing other tasks, their responses regarding aid were not significantly different from those of conservatives. This finding suggests, according to the authors, that liberals are actively adjusting their thinking to bring it in line with their values. If they are too busy to do so, they respond just as conservatives do. If, on the other hand, they have time to think, they adjust their responses to help even those who are first held responsible.

My point here is that liberals and conservatives might not be as fundamentally different as we currently tend to believe. The very human tendency to hold the individual responsible appears to be shared by most Americans, but liberals may change that response to make it consistent with their values, in a sense overriding their initial reaction.

One currently popular approach to examining the moral values that underlie political ideology, Moral Foundations Theory, also holds that liberals and conservatives have more in common then they realize. Jonathan Haidt, Jesse Graham, and colleagues make the case that human beings across cultures tend to endorse six moral foundations that guide their moral decision-making.[16] The care/harm foundation relates to individuals who are suffering and in need, and it is associated with emotions like sympathy. The liberty/oppression value is related to reactions against limits placed on one's personal freedom by others who seek to dominate the individual. The fairness/cheating foundation pertains to concerns about fairness and justice. We respond to those who violate rules of fairness (by being dishonest or taking more than one's share) with anger. The loyalty/betrayal foundation is concerned with strong commitment to one's group and tends to be associated with emotions like pride or, if violated, rage. Authority/subversion is about deference to authority and respect for tradition. Purity/degradation relates to responses to contamination and is associated with feelings of disgust. The first three are considered to be "individualizing values" in that they focus on protecting the individual from harm; the latter three are "binding values," which are more focused on preservation of the group.

Haidt argues that moral judgments are made on an intuitive (rather than rational) basis using these foundations. We have a gut feeling that

something is right or wrong, and then we might later provide a rationale for the decision. Their research also documents that liberals and conservatives place particular emphasis on different moral foundations. Whereas they find evidence that liberals are primarily focused on harm, followed by liberty and fairness and are less influenced by the others, conservatives tend to hold all six as relatively important. Haidt and colleagues suggest that these different value emphases explain why those on the right and left respond differently to a variety of issues.

It is illuminating to apply Haidt's model to the aforementioned study of conservative and liberal reactions to a Marine killing an Iraqi civilian or a policy officer shooting a cougar. Liberals' emphasis on care for the suffering and vulnerable would certainly lead them to condemn the Marine and the cop; they would want to protect the victims. On the other hand, conservatives, who place equal value on respecting authority and remaining loyal to the ingroup, would be motivated to protect and support the Marine and the cop. Thus, Moral Foundations Theory holds promise for providing a deeper understanding of how and why liberals and conservatives sometimes place blame differently.

Indeed, there is some evidence that these values influence blame of victims. In one series of studies, Laura Niemi and Liane Young had participants rate their responses to a victim and perpetrator in scenarios describing both sexual and not-sexual crimes.[17] They also measured respondents' endorsement of five of the moral foundations using a scale developed earlier.[18] To give you a sense of how these values are measured, someone who is high in the care value would tend to agree that "Compassion for those who are suffering is the most crucial virtue"; individuals high in the fairness value would agree that "Justice is the most important requirement for society"; those high in loyalty would believe "It is more important to be a team player than to express oneself"; those high in authority would agree that "If I were a soldier and disagreed with my commanding officer's orders, I would obey anyway because that is my duty"; those high in purity would agree that "I would call some acts wrong on the grounds that they are unnatural." The studies demonstrated that individuals who more strongly endorse the care and fairness values were less likely to blame victims, whereas those who emphasize the loyalty, authority, and purity values were more likely to do so. Though, as

mentioned, endorsement of these values is related to political ideology, these authors suggest that the values operate independent of it.

There have been criticisms of Moral Foundations Theory,[19] but it has spurred a great deal of research, and its influence has been felt well outside of psychology. Part of its popularity likely springs from the fact that it presents a less-negative portrayal of political conservativism than much of the scholarship in political psychology. Other current approaches to understanding ideology suggest that conservatism is associated with authoritarianism, rigidity, and fear of uncertainty, as opposed to representing a more expansive view of moral values.[20] As such, the theory suggests the possibility of reducing affective polarization by recognizing shared moral foundations due to the fact that both liberals and conservatives endorse the individualizing values. Haidt also recommends that liberals might consider the benefits offered by the values that are not shared (the binding values).[21] Those values help to ensure a functioning group in which individuals can count on one another. On that optimistic note, let's move on to considering some ways of influencing perceived blame for social problems in hopes of finding additional common ground between the right and the left.

Reason for Hope: Attributions of Blame Can be Influenced

One of the earliest and most comprehensive pieces of scholarship on the question of influencing perceptions of responsibility for social problems is a book by political communication expert, Shanto Iyengar.[22] Iyengar suggested that perceptions of responsibility have a fundamental influence on the way people think about political issues. In addition, he proposed that the way television news programs cover these issues strongly affects the audience's perceptions of who or what is responsible for the problem. He identifies two ways that TV news programs tend to frame an issue: episodic, which is focused on concrete examples of events or issues, and thematic, which relies on more general information about the topic. For example, a news story could illustrate the problem of poverty using a story of an individual poor person (episodic frame) or, alternatively,

provide general contextual information about the issue, such as statistics about the prevalence of poverty (thematic frame). Iyengar provides compelling evidence that the audience is more likely to attribute poverty to individual shortcomings among the poor if exposed to the episodic frame and more likely to view it as a societal problem when exposed to the thematic frame. In a series of laboratory experiments, he validated this finding with a number of the important social issues we've considered in this book: poverty, racial inequality, and terrorism.

Iyengar documents that news programs use episodic framing much more than thematic framing, in a sense leading the public to place blame for social problems on the individuals who suffer from them rather than on society. And of course, if one believes that the individual is to blame, one is unlikely to hold the government to account for fixing the problem. Thus, framing affects individuals' policy preferences in ways that withhold help from those who need it and allow society to ignore the problem. In addition, episodic framing makes it less likely that the government will be held accountable for solving the problem.

Perhaps you were surprised, as my students tend to be, by the idea that a more general overview of a social problem, such as poverty, would lead people to make more societal attributions than a story focusing on an individual who is poor. They understandably imagine that an individual story would be not only more compelling but more likely to engender sympathy for the poor. But in fact, it appears that the inclination to hold an individual responsible, to blame them, for their situation is so strong that any focus on the person leads to an individualistic attribution. We find ways to blame the person.

In an attempt to change poverty attributions, particularly for those who work with the poor, one recent study tested the effects of a poverty simulation.[23] The researchers exposed both college students and social service providers to the Community Action Poverty simulation. This facilitated simulation organizes participants into "families" which are provided with information about their jobs, monetary resources, and so on. Each group must navigate its way through the trials and tribulations of normal living on a limited income in four 15-minute blocks of time, each representing a week in real life. They must carry out tasks such as working, dealing with childcare, applying for government support,

taking care of expenses, and so on. The facilitators distribute "luck of the draw" cards that either benefit the family (winning a small lottery) or pose a challenge (having to pick up a sick child from school) to represent the ups and downs we all experience in life but that are particularly felt by the poor. There are negative consequences for failing to meet responsibilities or breaking the law, such as eviction for not paying rent or being jailed for theft or dealing drugs. The whole exercise, which lasts about three hours, is thus aimed at providing participants the opportunity to experience something akin to life in poverty. This simulation is used widely with social service providers in the US, but its effects on causal attributions for poverty had not previously been tested.

The results revealed that participation in the simulation significantly affected the attributions of both college students and social service providers; an index measuring internal versus external attributions before and after participation revealed that both groups made more external attributions for poverty and fewer internal ones upon completion of the program. Though they reported that the effect was stronger for students than social service providers, it is encouraging that both groups moved toward externalizing; that is, blame of poor people for their plight was reduced in both groups.

The authors suggest that simulations like this one build empathy for the poor. It is easy to blame when you have no experience with the difficult predicament of being poor. Perhaps you are reminded of the Actor-Observer Bias we discussed in Chap. 1; the actor sees the situation, whereas the observer sees the person as a causal force. Putting former observers into the position of being actors, even for limited time and in a situation much more benign than actual poverty, changes their perspective, reminiscent of the old adage that one should not judge another person until walking in his shoes.

A large, multination series of five studies has reported similar findings using just a ten-minute online poverty simulation.[24] The researchers reported that after the simulation, participants made more situational and fewer dispositional attributions for poverty. They also found significant effects of a brief writing exercise, intended to prime situational attributions, in which respondents noted down three reasons why some people are poor when they don't deserve to be. These simple interventions not

only increased situational attributions but also reduced support for inequality and increased helping behaviors toward the poor. The effects persisted in a follow-up study 155 days after the intervention. As the authors point out, inducing people to attribute poverty to situational factors rather than blaming the poor themselves has powerful effects and is a promising way to increase support for public policies aimed at reducing inequality.

Why do Americans hold so tightly to the idea that poverty is the responsibility of the poor themselves rather than being a societal problem? Increasingly, research suggests that our belief in the American Dream is responsible. Recall that Americans are generally socialized to believe that through our own efforts, we can all succeed; in other words, success is within our personal control. We are also taught that success is tied with virtue. As children, we are inundated with these ideas, such as the message that any child can grow up to be president. Children's books, like the classic *Little Engine That Could*, suggest that even if we have few advantages, with effort and a belief in ourselves, we can do anything. I'm sure you can think of many more examples of these ideas in books and movies. In fact, during the time I was writing this chapter, while admiring an old bank building in a New England town, I noticed this message carved at the top: "Victory for the individual over the odds that beset him." We are surrounded by lessons in individualism.

It is perhaps motivating for children to believe that they can do anything. And it makes a very compelling story. As the daughter of an immigrant to the US who was in many ways the classic "self-made man," I do understand the attraction of the story. And certainly, hard work, motivation, and a belief in oneself are big parts of the story of many individuals who succeed. On the other hand, we tend to ignore the situational factors that helped. We ignore the times when aid from others gave someone a leg up. And we rarely consider just plain good luck.

You might recall the controversy over President Obama's suggestion that successful people have benefitted from help from others. In a portion of a campaign speech on July 13, 2012, in response to some proposed tax cuts, he stated:

> There are a lot of wealthy, successful Americans who agree with me—because they want to give something back. They know they didn't—look,

> if you've been successful, you didn't get there on your own. You didn't get there on your own. I'm always struck by people who think, well, it must be because I was just so smart. There are a lot of smart people out there. It must be because I worked harder than everybody else. Let me tell you something—there are a whole bunch of hardworking people out there.
>
> If you were successful, somebody along the line gave you some help. There was a great teacher somewhere in your life. Somebody helped to create this unbelievable American system that we have that allowed you to thrive. Somebody invested in roads and bridges. If you've got a business—you didn't build that. Somebody else made that happen. The Internet didn't get invented on its own. Government research created the Internet so that all the companies could make money off the Internet.
>
> The point is, is that when we succeed, we succeed because of our individual initiative, but also because we do things together.[25]

His opponent, Mitt Romney and many other Republicans used segments of his remarks out of context to suggest that Obama did not believe that business owners made their own success. There was great outrage that he would even suggest that other factors might be partially responsible. Why the outrage? Because what Obama said violates our core belief that the US is a meritocracy in which any virtuous and hard-working person can succeed. Considerable research documents that a belief in meritocracy is at the heart of our blame of the poor. And some recent studies suggest that changing the belief in meritocracy actually changes beliefs about the causes of poverty.

Crystal Hoyt and colleagues conducted a series of studies examining the relation between belief in meritocracy, blame of the poor, and negative attitudes toward them.[26] The first study substantiated that a belief in meritocracy is positively related to blame of the poor for poverty, which is in turn, positively linked with negative attitudes toward the poor. Once again, we see that prejudice against a particular group is partially predicated on blaming group members for their plight. The second study revealed that when individuals are exposed to an argument disputing that the US is a meritocracy, both blame of the poor for poverty and negative attitudes toward them decrease.

One of the core elements of a belief in meritocracy is the idea of social mobility, that it is possible for one to move up in the economic hierarchy,

and there is evidence that Americans, as would be expected, overestimate social mobility in the US.[27] Psychologists Martin Day and Susan Fiske suggest that one of the reasons Americans do not more strenuously object to increasing income inequality is because of this belief in social mobility.[28] If one believes that moving up the economic ladder is at least moderately possible, then striking inequality is less threatening because a person's position in the hierarchy seems justified. They could move up if they tried hard enough. Thus, belief in social mobility contributes to the motive of system justification, which we considered in the first chapter. We wish to believe that our system is fair and just and are therefore prone to rationalizations that confirm that belief.

The researchers presented participants with information about social mobility, with some reading that it was quite low and others that it was moderately high. Specifically, one description implied that it is relatively easy to move up the economic ladder and the other suggested that it was extremely difficult. The information affected participants' attitudes toward the present system. Those who were exposed to information suggesting that social mobility is low were less likely to engage in system justification; specifically, they had lower beliefs that the US is a meritocracy and lower belief in a just world. The findings are important in that the tendency toward justifying the status quo is one of the obstacles to social change. If people become aware of unfairness in the system, they are more willing to change it. Unfortunately, studies of how information on social mobility might affect attitudes toward public policy are mixed, with some research suggesting that political conservatives are less influenced by exposure to the reality of low social mobility than are liberals[29] and some indicating that Americans who believe in high social mobility are particularly resistant to changing that view.[30] Still, the research suggests that people's views of poverty and extreme income inequality more generally might be amenable to change by providing accurate information about current economic conditions.

Finally, in regard to attributions and economic policy beliefs, some work has indicated that simply changing the way information about income inequality is presented can influence beliefs about the causes of poverty and wealth as well as support for redistribution policies. Rosalind Chow and Jeff Galak hypothesized that framing information about

inequality by focusing on the rich having more rather than the poor having less might affect how people respond.[31] They suggest that thinking about the wealthy might make individuals question whether they earned their wealth through their own efforts or benefitted from unfair advantages.

Respondents were presented with information that was framed as the rich having more (indicating that the top 5% earn an average of $111,000 more than the median wage earner) or as the poor having less (suggesting that the median wage earner makes an average of $111,000 less than the top 5%). Note that the information is the same, though it is framed differently. Another group of participants received no information about income inequality. All respondents then answered questions about internal and external attributions for wealth and poverty as well as two items about redistributive tax policies. The results revealed that, as expected, conservatives in the "poor have less" and "no information" conditions, were less supportive of income redistribution than liberals. However, in the "rich have more" condition, there was no difference—conservatives were equally supportive of raising taxes on the rich. They also report that conservatives' elevated support for the policy was in part because they were more likely to make external attributions for wealth when exposed to the "rich have more" framing. As the authors conclude, "For researchers and policy-makers, these findings suggest one simple approach that can influence how individuals think about and respond to income inequality: Change the language used to describe it."[32]

Similarly, research supports framing effects on perceptions of and responses to racial inequality. Brian Lowery and colleagues conducted a series of studies on the effects of framing racial inequality in terms of Black disadvantage versus white advantage.[33] The authors note that racial inequality has typically been presented in the latter manner, emphasizing the disadvantages Black Americans experience and that most Americans seem unconcerned about the glaring inequality. This paradox might be explained in part by the fact that whites perceive policies that reduce inequality as harming their group and thus group interest promotes an acceptance of inequality. However, as we've discussed, individuals are not only motivated to benefit their group in material ways but also to think highly of it and be proud of it. They suggest that framing racial inequality

in terms of white advantage might threaten that group esteem by implying that the higher status of white Americans is not deserved. Indeed, an earlier study indicated that framing inequality in terms of white privilege was associated with greater collective guilt and lower racism than framing it as Black disadvantage.[34] The studies by Lowery and colleagues confirmed that framing of racial inequality in terms of advantages to whites lowered their esteem for their own group and was associated with stronger endorsement of policies perceived to reduce the group's advantages. Their aptly titled article "Paying for positive group esteem" suggests that whites are willing to sacrifice some benefits of whiteness in order to preserve esteem for their group.

Learning about systemic inequality and white privilege also has significant effects on individuals' perceptions of police shootings of Black suspects. Erin Cooley and colleagues conducted two studies in which participants read a description of a police-civilian encounter that ended with the officer shooting the Black civilian.[35] As predicted, they found that the non-Black participants who were liberal held racism as a factor in the shooting more than those who were conservative. However, they also reported that exposure to a short reading on white privilege increased perceived racism and blame of the police officer and reduced blame of the victim, regardless of political ideology.

Though these studies are encouraging, it is clear that white people's responses to lessons about white privilege are complicated. In an earlier study, Taylor Phillips and Brian Lowery reported that whites sometimes respond to the discomfort of confronting white privilege by claiming great personal hardship.[36] That is, they may acknowledge that white privilege in general exists but distance themselves from it by emphasizing their own personal struggles. In other words, "My group has advantages, but I do not" is one way to manage the threat of acknowledging one's own privilege. In addition, another set of studies documented that reading about white privilege caused liberal whites to have more negative attitudes toward people who are poor and white.[37] They blamed white poor people more for being poor and had less sympathy toward them. Perhaps their logic was that if you are white and still can't make it in this country in spite of your privilege, you must not be trying hard enough.

It is hoped that future research can help to clarify how to harness the benefits of learning about white privilege without the potential downside of reducing support for the white poor.

Lastly, there is some evidence that blame of rape victims and perpetrators can be influenced. One study presented participants with vignettes describing a rape and varied the language used so that it focused primarily either on the victim or on the perpetrator.[38] The results revealed that the perpetrator-focused vignette was associated with less perceived responsibility and blame of the victim and higher perceptions of the use of force.

This area of research on interventions to change attributions for social issues like poverty, racial inequality, and sexual assault is in its infancy. And to my knowledge, there are not similar interventions aimed at changing attributions for other social issue we've considered. However, there is an extensive literature on using attribution change programs (termed "attribution retraining") in clinical settings to improve relations in couples, to combat depression, and to increase achievement motivation and reduce aggression in young children.[39] Therefore, attributions can be changed. And the research just considered provides some promising avenues for doing so in regard to social problems: framing issues in a way that reduces perceptions of individual blame; providing opportunities for people to learn about the experiences of those affected by the problem firsthand; helping individuals to think about the advantages their own group enjoys; and prompting them to consider whether the US is truly a level-playing field and whether the world is as just as we'd like to believe.

There are also clear implications for those hoping to convince people to support particular political initiatives. The evidence suggests that one is unlikely to garner support for a particular policy if its aim is to help individuals who are perceived as responsible for their own plight. Therefore, efforts must be made to change that perception. Politicians would do well to discuss the causes of social problems rather than appealing only to ideology. Neither liberals nor conservatives are particularly enthusiastic about throwing money at people who are considered blameworthy, so that is a starting point for communication. How I would love to hear a political candidate say:

> You know, I understand why many of you don't want to raise taxes on the wealthy to benefit the poor. You believe that both groups got where they are through their own merits or lack thereof. The rich deserve to be rich, and the poor are to blame for their place in society. I believed that too for most of my life. And maybe that was the case at one time, but in today's America the top 5% of earners hold 75% of the country's wealth and the bottom 60% possess less than 1% of it. And those fat cats at the top were much more likely to have been born rich. In our country today, social mobility, the ability to move up the economic ladder, is lower than in the European Union. That's an embarrassment for what we used to call the land of opportunity. The system is stacked in favor of the elite and against the poor, and Americans don't believe in an unfair, rigged system. That's why we have to make it right.

Final Thoughts

I began by illustrating the importance of blame in everyday life and particularly in influencing political attitudes and decision-making. Blaming seems to be a fundamental tendency, and it does serve a purpose in society. On the other hand, acting as a judge of others is only just if the judge is unbiased, and I hope you have come to see that human beings are deeply biased. We are predisposed to think favorably of ourselves and our group, whether that group is defined by race, religion, or political party. We are biased by our preference for living in a world and a political system that we perceive as just and orderly. We are influenced by our culture and our worldview. And even when our intentions are good, our biases tend to be invisible to us.

I'd like to offer one last example to illustrate what I mean. As you likely know, Sheryl Sandberg, chief operating officer at Facebook, published a book in 2013 called *Lean In* that became a bestseller.[40] The book, as well as her famous TED talk, suggested that, in a nutshell, women can succeed in the world of work by asserting themselves more and demanding a seat at the table. I'm sure Sandberg considers herself to be a feminist with a goal of empowering women to achieve success as she herself had done, though as a Harvard graduate from a privileged background, I'm not sure all women are as likely as she was to benefit from leaning in.

Leaving that aside, what message does the book send? It suggests that women's lower achievement in the business world and in politics is due to their lack of confidence and failure to assert themselves. Though she acknowledges some external barriers that women face, she largely focuses on overcoming internal barriers. Thus, she provides an individualistic explanation for a societal problem. If women behave differently, they will get what they want. Does that sound at all familiar? It's no different from the individualistic explanations people have been making for economic and racial inequality for a very long time.

A series of clever experiments by Jae Yun Kim and colleagues[41] tested the effects of Sandberg's message, and I'll bet you can guess what they found. After being exposed to the idea that women can succeed by overcoming their own internal barriers through reading part of Sandberg's book or watching a portion of her TED talk, the participants were more likely to endorse the idea that women are responsible for causing their own inequality and for remedying it. They also were more likely to support policies that focused on changing women over those aimed at changing the system.

So, here we have a feminist intending to empower women, but in fact, she is endorsing a worldview that blames them and ultimately discourages efforts to reduce systemic sexism. I am not saying no one was helped by her message. I'm sure there are success stories of women who demanded a place at the table and got it, but, unfortunately, just as blaming the individual is not going to fix poverty, it's not likely to reduce gender inequality either. If an educated feminist woman with what I assume to be good intentions, who, incidentally, identifies as a Democrat,[42] blames women for their plight, what hope is there?

In truth, Sandberg is doing precisely what most of us do, making a self-serving attribution. Few people who become billionaires think much of the lucky breaks they had in life. It is much more pleasant to think of all the things they did right, thus assuring themselves that they deserve their place at the top of the hierarchy.

I'd like to close by encouraging a mindset that does not automatically construe the world in the way that makes us most comfortable. Let us consider the possibility that our first impulse might be wrong. Let us face the fact that bad things happen to good people all the time; that the rape

victim did not deserve to be raped; that the woman with an unwanted pregnancy was not necessarily irresponsible; that the Black teenager shot by police might not be to blame for his own death. And when politicians cast blame about, trying to avoid responsibility for failure by attributing it to the other party, or worse, immigrants or other marginalized groups, let's ask them to show us the evidence for their conclusion. Because blame has such potent effects, we must be mindful of how we use it and how it is used on us.

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[1] Note: Page numbers followed by 'n' refer to notes.

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