LIONIZING THOSE WHO AGREE AND DEMONIZING THOSE WHO DISAGREE: EFFECTS ON ATTITUDE EXTREMITY

by

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Abstract

Past research has shown that merely thinking about an attitude object can result in self-generated attitude polarization (Tesser, 1978). The current study examined the effects of a specific type of thought—attributing personality traits to proponents and opponents of a social issue—on participants' attitudes toward partisans on both sides. Participants completed an online survey in which they either attributed personality traits to people who support or oppose legalized abortions, or listed synonyms of experimenter-provided personality traits. Participants who made trait attributions reported more positive attitudes towards those who agreed and more negative attitudes toward those who disagreed with the participant's position on abortion than did participants who wrote synonyms. Additionally, extremity of attributed traits predicted more positive (negative) post-manipulation attitudes towards those who agreed (disagreed) with the participant's position on abortion. Our findings extended past research on mere thought by offering new insights into a specific thought strategy that can lead to attitude polarization.

Lionizing those who agree and demonizing those who disagree: Effects on attitude extremity

Polarization, particularly partisan antipathy, in the United States is currently higher than at any point in the past few decades ("Political Polarization in the American Public," 2014). Contempt for out-party members, for instance, has been increasing since the 1970s and is now stronger than warmth felt towards in-party members (Finkel et al., 2020). Increased polarization should be of high concern to Americans because this might preclude social relationships, complicate people's support for politicians to compromise, and reduce government efficacy (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015; Iyengar et al., 2012; Wolf et al., 2012). Thus, understanding how attitudes towards social groups are constructed and polarized will be important in developing interventions to reduce antipathy felt towards opposite partisans. Scholars, political commentators, and lay people alike have attributed the rise in polarization to increased exposure to negative caricatures of out-partisan members, online partisan criticism, and changes to the media landscape (Finkel et al., 2020; Iyengar et al., 2012; Suhay et al., 2018). Though these explanations that involve exposure to information *generated by others* are undoubtedly important, we believe that the role of *self-generated* attitude change has been largely overlooked.

People can change their own attitudes by pursuing specific thought strategies that go beyond the information they know about an attitude object (Decker & Lord, 2022). One particular thought strategy that might result in self-generated attitude change involves drawing inferences about the personality traits of those whom we agree versus disagree with. Individuals might, for instance, lionize people who agree with their stance on a social issue and demonize those on the other side. Doing so might exaggerate the extent to which people view those who

agree with them as “good” and those who disagree with them as “bad,” and ultimately result in more extreme attitudes towards people on each side of the social issue.

The present study explored the effect of attributing personality traits about social groups on subsequent attitudes. We predicted that participants who lionized those with whom they agreed and demonized those with whom they disagreed would report more extreme attitudes than attitudes reported by a control condition. This hypothesis was suggested by research on mere thought, attitude construal theories, and specific thought strategies known to make attitudes more extreme.

Mere Thought

Past research has shown that mere thought can result in self-generated attitude polarization in the absence of new information (Tesser, 1978). Sadler and Tesser (1973), for instance, found that participants who had the opportunity to think about either a likeable or dislikeable confederate reported more extreme attitudes towards the confederate than those who were prevented from thought by engaging in a control task. In other words, thinking about an initially liked confederate resulted in greater *liking* of that confederate, while thinking about an initially *disliked* confederate resulted in greater *disliking* of that confederate. The effect of mere thought on attitudes has been replicated by numerous follow up studies, demonstrating this relationship using different types of initial information, such as personality trait descriptions (Tesser & Cowan, 1977) in addition to first-person encounters (Sadler & Tesser, 1973). This pattern of results has also occurred for a variety of attitude objects including policy issues such as legalizing prostitution and changing educational grading policies (Tesser & Conlee, 1975), and inanimate objects such as artwork (Tesser, 1976).

Although the effect of mere thought on attitude change is robust, Tesser's research did not show *how* thought led to more extreme attitudes. One possibility for this relationship might be that attitude change involved the reinterpretation of existing cognitions. Tesser and Cowan (1977) showed that more ambiguous trait descriptions resulted in greater attitude polarization, suggesting that increased ambiguity might allow for cognitions to be reinterpreted with more ease. Alternatively, it might be possible that attitude change resulted from generating *new* attitude consistent thoughts. If this explanation is correct, then engaging in thought strategies that go beyond the initial information would result in a more extreme subset of activated thoughts or associations, which might be especially likely to inform more extreme attitudes.

Attitude Construal Theories

Attitude construal theories suggest that attitudes are based on the associations that are activated when an evaluative judgment is made (Lord & Lepper, 1999; Schwarz, 2006, 2007; Schwarz & Bohner, 2001; Smith & DeCoster, 2000; Tourangeau, 1992; Wilson & Hodges, 1992). Associations become activated when they are readily accessible, and recently activated or repeatedly activated associations are especially likely to inform attitudes (Wyer & Srull, 1989). This framework suggests that attitude stability would occur when the same associations are activated for an attitude object across two time points, but attitude change would occur when different associations are activated. To illustrate, Lord and colleagues (2004) found greater attitude change when participants were primed with different social category exemplars across time points than when participants were primed with the same exemplars.

Based on this framework, people might *think* themselves into more extreme attitudes in the absence of new information by generating thoughts that stray beyond the information they know. If people generate new, attitude consistent thoughts just before making an evaluative

judgment, the recency and extremity of the resulting associations might result in more extreme attitudes. If people consider *unrelated* information, in contrast, this might result in less extreme attitudes than thought generation, because this might prevent the generation of new associations.

Thought Strategies

Certain ways of thinking about an attitude object might activate more extreme associations than others, and ultimately lead to more extreme attitudes. We propose that thought strategies that encourage thinking *beyond* the information given (Bruner, 1973) are likely to change attitudes, because they activate new associations to the attitude object. One such thought strategy involves generalizing a social group's personality traits across settings. Decker and Lord (2022) found that when participants generalized a target group's personality traits across settings, they tended to over-generalize, and attitudes towards those groups were more extreme than attitudes toward a social group whose initial information was reviewed. Additional research in our lab found that instructing participants to write social media posts about a target group resulted in more extreme attitudes compared to attitudes reported by control participants (Decker et al., under review). Participants in our communication studies thought beyond the initial group information by including exaggerations and elaborations in their social media posts and subsequently reported more extreme attitudes toward the target group, an effect mediated by extreme associations.

If generalizing about the same personality traits across different settings and exaggerating and elaborating about a social group's personality traits in hypothetical social media posts resulted in more extreme attitudes, perhaps simply *attributing* additional personality traits to a social group might also result in more extreme attitudes. People often think of others in trait terms and demonstrate implicit knowledge of which traits covary (Schneider et al., 1996), but no

previous research to our knowledge has assessed whether self-generating personality traits about social groups would polarize attitudes toward the social groups. The current study aimed to address this gap in research by exploring whether this specific thought strategy—trait attribution—is another way of going beyond the information given that results in attitude polarization.

The Present Experiment

The primary aim of the present study was to determine whether trait attribution is another thought strategy by which people go beyond the information they know and polarize their own attitudes. Specifically, we aimed to provide an empirical demonstration that attributing traits about proponents and opponents of a social issue would make attitudes toward them more extreme than attitudes reported by participants who completed a control task. We also tested whether extremity of self-generated traits in the attribution condition would predict post-manipulation attitudes.

Participants completed an online survey in which they either attributed traits that proponents and opponents of legalized abortions might have, or generated synonyms of experimenter-provided personality traits. They then reported their attitudes towards those who agreed with them (congruent thinkers) and disagreed with them (incongruent thinkers). We hypothesized that participants in the trait attribution condition would report more positive attitudes towards congruent thinkers and more negative attitudes towards incongruent thinkers than those in the control condition and that extremity of the attributed traits would be related to more extreme attitudes toward partisans on their own and the other side.

Method

Participants. A total of 162 participants from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) qualified to complete an online Qualtrics survey for $1.75. To qualify for the main study,

participants must have indicated that they were a U.S. citizen, spoke English as their first language, and that they moderately opposed or moderately supported legalizing abortion. Their initial attitude toward legalizing abortion was determined moderate if they reported between -4 and -2 or between 2 and 4 on a -5 = *extremely oppose legalizing abortion* to 5 = *extremely in favor of legalizing abortion* scale. Of the initial 162 participants, 22 were excluded for not listing traits during the attribution task, resulting in a final sample of 140 participants (56% male) from 19 to 74 years old (Mdn_{age} = 36 years) whose years of education ranged from 10 to 21 years (M_{educ} = 15.67 years). Of these qualifying participants, 47 opposed legalizing abortion and 93 favored legalizing abortion. Neither participant age nor gender qualified the results of the experiment. A sensitivity analysis showed that with 140 participants, the present study could detect an effect size as small as .24 with 80% statistical power. This research was approved by Texas Christian University's Institutional Review Board for human participants, and informed consent was collected from all participants.

Procedure

To familiarize them with personality traits, participants first rated how positive or negative it was for a group of people to possess each of 10 positive and 10 negative experimenter-provided traits (tolerant, peaceful, rude, ethical, unfriendly, dishonest, moral, uncooperative, trustworthy, kind, belligerent, courteous, unethical, mean, honest, intolerant, friendly, immoral, cooperative, and untrustworthy) on scales from -5 = *very negative* to 5 = *very positive*. Participants were then randomly assigned to either a trait attribution or a control condition.

Experimental manipulation. Participants in the *trait attribution* condition (N = 70) first read a cover letter on abortion and were instructed to, "Describe the interpersonal traits of those

who compose frequent social medias posts that support/oppose abortion," by generating five traits that proponents and five traits that opponents of legalized abortions might have. Participants in the *control* condition ($N = 70$) were instructed to generate synonyms for 10 experimenter-provided traits, five positive and five negative, without mention of the abortion issue. The 10 traits control participants wrote synonyms for were bossy, brave, controlling, caring, ignorant, ethical, irresponsible, intelligent, stubborn, and strong. In short, control condition participants also generated personality traits, but not in reference to abortion partisans. Participants in both conditions then rated the valence of the traits they self-generated on scales from -5 = *extremely negative* to 5 = *extremely positive*.

Dependent variables. Immediately following the experimental manipulation, participants reported their impressions of proponents and opponents of legalized abortions on scales from -4 = *extremely negative* to 4 = *extremely positive*. Participants also reported their behavioral intentions towards these target groups, indicating how willing they were to socialize with, do business with, and have their children (if they had children) taught history by members of each group on scales from -4 = *extremely unwilling* to 4 = *extremely willing*.

To explore individual differences that might moderate the effect of trait attribution on attitudes, participants then completed a 10-item Social Desirability Scale (Strahan & Gerbasi, 1972) and a 15-item Actively Open-Minded Thinking Scale (Svedholm-Häkkinen & Lindeman, 2018). Finally, participants completed a suspicion check in which they were asked to guess the experimental hypothesis and completed a debriefing procedure that has been shown to reliably remove the effects of experimentally induced attitude change (Ross et al., 1975).

Analysis Plan

Primary analysis examined whether post-manipulation attitudes of participants who attributed personality traits to people who agree (attitude congruent) and disagree (attitude incongruent) about legalizing abortion were more extreme than attitudes of participants who wrote synonyms for experimenter-provided traits. This involved conducting 2 (condition: trait attribution vs. control) X 2 (target group attitudes: attitudes toward the congruent vs. incongruent target groups) mixed design analyses of variance (ANOVAs) on the four dependent measures. We constructed our dependent variables such that attitudes towards congruent thinkers included attitudes towards proponents (opponents) of legalized abortions for participants who indicated an initially positive (negative) attitude towards the issue. The same method was used to construct dependent variables for attitudes towards those who were *incongruent* thinkers. Because scale reliability was high for the four dependent measures (a = .86 for congruent, .75 for incongruent), we treated the average of the dependent measures as a single observed index of overall attitudes towards the two target groups.

Secondary analyses using linear regression examined whether the extremity of attributed traits or either of the individual difference measures predicted post-manipulation overall attitudes.

Results

Attitudes

A 2 (experimental condition: trait attribution vs. control) X 2 (target group attitudes: congruent vs. incongruent) mixed-design ANOVA was conducted on each of the four post-manipulation dependent variables, as well as the overall attitude measure. See Table 1 for all descriptive statistics.

Impressions. There was a significant two-way interaction between condition and target group impressions (congruent vs. incongruent) , $F(1, 138) = 7.43$, $p = .007$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$. Participants reported more *positive* impressions of those with congruent attitudes after attributing personality traits than after writing synonyms, $F(1, 138) = 4.14$, $p = .044$, $d = .34$ and reported more *negative* impressions of those with incongruent attitudes after attributing personality traits than after writing synonyms, $F(1, 138) = 6.67$, $p = .011$, $d = .43$.

Willingness to socialize. There was also a significant interaction between condition and willingness to socialize with each of the groups (congruent vs. incongruent), $F(1, 138) = 4.36$, $p = .039$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$. Participants reported greater *willingness* to socialize with those with congruent attitudes after attributing personality traits than after writing synonyms, $F(1, 138) = 8.00$, $p = .005$, $d = .47$. There was no significant difference found, however, in participants' *unwillingness* to socialize with people who had *incongruent* attitudes between the trait attribution and control conditions, $F(1, 138) = .53$, $p = .469$, $d = .12$.

Willingness to do Business: There was a marginally significant interaction found between condition and willingness to do business with each of the groups, $F(1, 138) = 3.10$, $p = .080$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. Participants reported greater *willingness* to do business with people who had congruent attitudes after attributing personality traits than after writing synonyms, $F(1, 138) = 4.30$, $p = .040$, $d = .35$. There was no significant difference, however, in reported *unwillingness* to do business with people who had *incongruent* attitudes between the trait attribution and control condition, $F(1, 138) = .467$, $p = .496$, $d = .12$.

Willingness to Have Children Taught by: Finally, there was a significant two-way interaction between condition and willingness to have their children taught history by members of each group, $F(1, 138) = 8.52$, $p = .004$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$. Participants reported greater *willingness* to

have their children taught history by people who had congruent attitudes after attributing personality traits than after writing synonyms, $F(1, 138) = 4.46$, $p = .036$, $d = .35$. They also reported greater *unwillingness* to have their children taught history by people with *incongruent* attitudes after attributing personality traits than after writing synonyms, $F(1, 138) = 5.81$, $p = .017$, $d = .40$.

Overall Attitudes. The average of the four attitude measures also yielded a significant attitude X condition interaction, $F(1, 138) = 8.19$, $p = .005$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$. Participants reported more positive overall attitudes toward those with congruent attitudes after attributing personality traits than after writing synonyms, $F(1, 138) = 7.21$, $p = .008$, $d = .44$. They also reported more *negative* overall attitudes toward those with *incongruent* attitudes after attributing personality traits than after writing synonyms, $F(1, 138) = 4.08$, $p = .045$, $d = .34$.

Trait Extremity

Simple linear regression explored whether extremity of reported traits in the trait attribution condition predicted attitudes towards those with congruent and incongruent attitudes. A significant *positive* relationship was found between extremity of attributed traits and attitudes towards congruent thinkers, $b = 0.44$ ($SE = .07$), $t = 5.96$, $p \leq .001$, $R^2 = .34$. This relationship suggests that more positive attributed traits were related to more extreme positive attitudes towards congruent thinkers. Similarly, a significant relationship was found between extremity of attributed traits and attitudes towards *incongruent* thinkers, $b = 0.37$ ($SE = .09$), $t = 4.34$, $p \leq .001$, $R^2 = .22$, indicating that more negative attributed traits were related to more extreme negative attitudes towards incongruent thinkers. Overall, extremity of attributed traits predicted overall attitudes toward people with congruent and incongruent attitudes on the abortion issue.

Individual differences

Polarization scores were calculated by subtracting overall attitude scores towards congruent thinkers by overall attitude scores towards incongruent thinkers. Open minded thinking was not related to polarization scores, b = -0.20, SE = .16, t = 1.22, p = .22, R^2 = .01. nor was social desirability, b = -0.04, SE = .25, t = .15, p = .881, R^2 < .001. Given that social desirability did not predict polarization, and no participants correctly guessed the experimental hypothesis, we were able to rule out experimental demand as a proposed explanation for these findings.

Discussion

This study provided empirical support for the hypothesis that attributing personality traits to social groups can result in attitude polarization toward group members. Participants who attributed personality traits to both sides reported more positive attitudes towards those whom they agreed with on the abortion issue and more negative attitudes towards those whom they disagreed with compared to participants who wrote synonyms for experimenter-provided personality traits. The predicted pattern of results occurred for participants' impressions of, willingness to have children taught history by, and overall attitudes towards those with congruent and incongruent attitudes. Notably, though participants in the attribution condition reported more *willingness* to do business with and socialize with *congruent* thinkers, there was no significant difference in unwillingness to do business with and socialize with incongruent thinkers. Finally, the results also revealed that the extremity of self-generated traits in the attribution condition predicted more extreme overall post-manipulation attitudes. Our finding that attributing traits resulted in more extreme attitudes replicates and extends research on mere thought, attitude construal theories, and thought strategies previously shown to make attitudes more extreme.

The current study provides a conceptual replication of past work showing that merely thinking about an attitude object can lead to self-generated attitude change in the absence of new information (Tesser, 1978). Participants who thought about proponents and opponents of legalized abortions by attributing traits reported more extreme post-manipulation attitudes than participants who did not think about the social groups. It still remains unclear *how* exactly thought led to more extreme attitudes. Attitude construal theories suggest that attitudes are informed by accessible associations. When participants in the present experiment attributed traits that proponents and opponents of legalized abortions might have, those trait associations might have been accessible and informed subsequent attitudes. This framework suggests that the valence of associations should mediate the effect of thought on attitudes. Though we were unable to test this relationship using mediation, we found that extremity of attributed traits predicted post-manipulation attitudes. This finding supports the possibility that the extremity of associated thoughts influences the relationship between attribution and attitude polarization. Future research should include a measure of the associations that come to mind before or after attitude measures so mediation of association extremity can be assessed.

This study also contributes to research exploring specific thought strategies that result in attitude polarization. We believe that ways of thinking that go beyond what a person knows about an attitude object are especially likely to polarize attitudes. One way that individuals go beyond the information and polarize their own attitudes is by over-generalizing trait information about a social group across various contexts (Decker & Lord, 2022) and exaggerating and elaborating about a social group when writing social media posts (Decker & Lord, under review). The present study found that another thought strategy—trait attribution — also made attitudes toward social groups more extreme. This finding was consistent with our prediction that thought

strategies that involve thinking *beyond* the information known about an attitude object are especially likely to polarize attitudes. Participants in the attribution condition were specifically instructed to generate new traits about people on each side of the abortion issue and doing so informed more extreme attitudes and behavioral intentions towards the target groups.

Limitations and Future Directions

The present findings should be considered through the lens of several limitations. First, it is possible that the effect of attribution on attitudes might be moderated by participants' initial positions on the social issue. The current sample size was not large enough to test this possibility, but future research should explore whether participants initial position or additional variables might moderate the relationship between trait attribution and attitude polarization. Increasing the sample size would allow researchers to explore additional moderators with sufficient power.

Additionally, one might ask whether attitudes were made more extreme by exposure to a cover letter about abortion, and not the manipulation. Although unlikely, the cover letter participants in the attribution condition read about abortion might have primed them to generate more extreme attributions. Participants in the control condition wrote synonyms of common personality traits without exposure to this information. Future research should replicate this effect with equal exposure to the same cover letters to ensure that attitudes were made more extreme due to the manipulation.

Future research should also seek to explore the ecological validity of our current findings. In the interest of experimental control, only attitudes towards one social group were considered. It is possible that attitudes towards various social groups might be more or less resistant to attitude polarization. Thus, testing trait attribution on proponents and opponents of a variety of social issues would reveal the generalizability of the current findings. Additionally, though our

evidence suggests that trait attribution results in attitude polarization towards advocates on each side of a social issue, it remains unclear whether attributing polarizes attitudes towards the social issue itself. Follow-up studies should aim to resolve this gap in knowledge by testing whether trait attribution towards proponents and opponents of the social issue results in attitude change towards the issue.

Conclusion

Collectively, these results provided support for the idea that attributing traits about partisans on each side of a social issue—lionizing one side and demonizing the other--is one way by which attitudes are made more extreme in the absence of new information. Although much attention has been given to research on the ways in which exposure to inflammatory information can polarize attitudes, the findings from this project suggest that researchers might be overlooking a crucial piece to this complex puzzle: the effects of self-generated thoughts on attitude polarization. We cannot hope to combat attitude polarization without understanding the different ways in which exposure to new information and self-generated thoughts, together, contribute to this national crisis.

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Table 1. **Means and standard deviations of impressions, behavioral intentions, and overall attitudes towards groups with congruent and incongruent attitudes in the trait attribution and control conditions.**

Measure	Control *M (SD)*	Attribution *M (SD)*
Impression		
Congruent	1.21^{a} (1.91)	1.84^{b} (1.74)
Incongruent	-1.71^{a} (1.84)	-2.46^{b} (1.55)
Socialize With		
Congruent	1.60^{c} (1.56)	2.31^{d} (1.42)
Incongruent	$-.13^{c}$ (2.11)	$-.40^{c}$ (2.31)
Do Business With		
Congruent	1.94^{e} (1.52)	2.44^{f} (1.33)
Incongruent	$.50^{e}$ (2.04)	$.24^{e}$ (2.40)
Have Children Taught By		
Congruent	1.54^{g} (1.89)	2.16^{h} (1.54)
Incongruent	$-.69^{g}$ (2.12)	-1.53^{h} (2.01)
Overall		
Congruent	1.58^{i} (1.46)	2.19^{j} (1.23)
Incongruent	$-.51^{i}$ (1.52)	-1.04^{j} (1.58)

Note: Row means with different superscripts differed significantly at $p \leq .05$