

Motivated Reasoning and Its Applications to Life

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Abstract

People form conclusions based on the information they consume. Sometimes, however, these conclusions are formed on the basis of motivated reasoning, a type of directional reasoning that occurs when people want to gather evidence to support a desired conclusion. This behavior often leads to the formation and reinforcement of one's beliefs through the construction of a biased or false narrative that stems primarily from a person's desire to affirm themselves. Cognisant effort in obtaining evidence and considering facts in an unbiased, unmotivated manner is often necessary to prevent unconscious use of motivated reasoning. With origins in psychology and economics, the theory of motivated reasoning has branched out to encompass other fields, such as political science and communication. This paper will provide several examples of motivated reasoning across multiple disciplines, including politics, health, and business, and examine the ways that directionally motivated reasoning can impede on people's ability to form unbiased opinions as well as address some potential consequences of pervasive motivated reasoning.

Keywords

Motivated Reasoning, Human Behavior, Decision Making

1. Introduction

The way people behave is often baffling. Unlike the rational, impartial consumer that many economic models use to predict consumer behavior, people have a tendency to be irrational and biased in their decision-making, biases, judgments, and beliefs. Sometimes, these beliefs are false, unsupported, or influenced by misconceptions, and yet it is difficult to convince people that what they believe is incorrect. This can lead to distorted views on topics from politics to religion to even one's personal health. So how do people form these beliefs? One of the rea-

sons for this behavior is called motivated reasoning.

2. What Is Motivated Reasoning?

While definitions appear to vary from field to field, motivated reasoning can generally be defined as reasoning (through any information selection, decision-making, attitude formation, etc.) that is influenced by motivation or goals (Leeper & Mullinix, 2018). And though it first appeared in the fields of psychology and economics, the term “motivated reasoning” has garnered widespread use across multiple fields. It has become particularly prevalent in political science since the 2016 U.S. election, with researchers identifying motivated reasoning as the cause of polarization in politically-charged factual questions. As such, this article will explore several examples of motivated reasoning in varying parts of life.

In *The Case for Motivated Reasoning*, Kunda (1990) defined motivated reasoning through its differences from “normal” reasoning—reasoning motivated by directional goals and reasoning driven by goals of accuracy, respectively. Typically, when people reason, they are motivated to be accurate. As a result, they use more cognitive effort to reason, consider information, and process said information. This often results in more complex and time-consuming decision-making as well as more nuanced perspectives. Motivated (directional) reasoning, on the other hand, occurs when people want to reach a desired conclusion. They tend to favor evidence that supports said conclusion under the guise of rationality, often leading to the construction of a false or biased narrative despite the person themselves believing in its fairness. These classifications will help in identifying and explaining motivated reasoning in the scenarios below.

3. Applications of Motivated Reasoning

3.1. In Politics and Religion

Motivated reasoning can be seen quite prominently in ideological areas such as religion and politics. For example, the politically motivated, or “partisan” motivated reasoning is a type of directional reasoning that focuses on maintaining and protecting identity orientations towards a political party.

In a 2017 study that demonstrated how partisan motivated reasoning shapes citizens’ support, researchers recruited a nationally representative sample in the U.S. to complete a survey on the *Energy Independence and Security Act of 2007*. However, the researchers manipulated the survey to show party endorsements associated with identical policy information about the energy law, meaning no information changed other than which party appeared to support the bill. In the experiment, Democrats and Republicans were far more supportive of the law when they were informed that it was largely supported by members of their own party, but significantly less supportive of the same policy when they believed it was supported by the opposing party (Flynn et al., 2017).

Another prevalent debate in U.S. politics has been on climate change, with political parties sharply divided on its existence as well as its causes. In a study

conducted by Palm, Lewis, and Feng (2017), researchers found that the opinions of respondents towards climate change changed most significantly as a result of political party affiliation, as opposed to other variables such as age, gender, or education. The results of their study indicated that Americans were becoming more polarized, with opinions divided along party lines. Perhaps more alarming was the discovery that direct experience with indicators of climate change, such as record levels of drought, storms, and heat waves, did little to sway people's opinions on the topic. In fact, the study showed that the attitudes of Americans were swayed little by factors that were not political or economical. Palm et al. also concluded that those "most engaged and interested in public affairs" appeared to be the ones who sought out information in line with their political ideologies, resulting in the confirmation and strengthening of their beliefs over time.

The results of these studies indicate that people do not come to conclusions based on rationality alone, but rather allow for preconceived notions and biases to shape their takeaways.

In a similar vein, people are more likely to agree and accept religious beliefs that are able to affirm their own beliefs, and vice versa. Given the abundance of evidence for motivated reasoning in ideologically dense areas like politics, it would seem plausible that people would view things in relation to their religious beliefs through the same lens. In a study done by Robb Wilier (2009), those with an established fear of death were more likely to pursue religions that believed in an afterlife, and that the stronger one's fear of dying, the stronger one's faith became. As such, it can be concluded that if the awareness of death tends to encourage fear and anxiety, then people with a strong desire to soothe said fear will search for and adopt beliefs that can neutralize or moderate that fear, such as belief in life after death.

3.2. In Health

In the same way that people bias judgements about ideological issues like politics and religion, they also adopt similar mindsets when approaching issues like health. Similarly to how a religious person may collect evidence to support a specific belief, a smoker may attempt to convince themselves that smoking is not actually unhealthy. A study done by Kassarian and Cohen (1965) showed that smokers were less persuaded than nonsmokers about the risks of smoking when presented evidence by the Surgeon General's health report on the topic. This suggests that people who feel threatened by scientific evidence due to its contrast to their habits or lifestyle are motivated to disbelieve said evidence. The smoker encounters evidence that does not support what they want to believe, and thus, finds ways to justify rejecting it.

During the recent global pandemic, a number of COVID-19-related rumors, conspiracy theories and fake news dominated social media. Such beliefs included, for example, that data on the effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines was made up,

that 5G networks were spreading the coronavirus, that injecting or ingesting bleach was a safe way to kill the coronavirus, and that the flu shot provides immunity to COVID-19 (Pickles et al., 2021). And while a recent study has shown there to be little correlation between political affiliation and interpretation of COVID-19 data, suggesting a lack of politically motivated reasoning in areas pertaining to health, it nonetheless found that individuals' attitudes towards COVID-19 were influenced by their prior beliefs (Maguire et al., 2022). There are both positives and negatives to these findings. The lack of politically motivated reasoning when forming attitudes about the coronavirus seems to show that most people do not deliberately try to twist important health-related information to suit their own beliefs, despite any politically charged messaging about these issues. The trend of prior beliefs influencing attitudes towards health issues, however, indicates that measures should be taken to prevent motivated reasoning in health nonetheless.

3.3. In Consumerism

Consumers often approach problems in a similar way to those above. Whether it is determining the ethical grounds on fast fashion, or deciding whether or not to buy shoes from a company that uses underpaid workers in third world countries, problems, and thus perceptions, related to consumerism are plenty. Studies have shown that consumers claim that they care about sweatshop labor and are willing to pay for products that are free of it, but a study showed that participants were more likely to accept or endorse the use of cheap labor when considering a vacation for themselves rather than their friends, despite its questionable labor practices (Paharia et al., 2013). This demonstrates a correlation between the acceptance or willful ignorance of unethical practices based on the relationship between one's purchase intention and the perceived desirability of the product. How people react to unethical labor is an example of how people process ethical information in everyday situations where their beliefs may conflict with their actions, and demonstrates that ethicality and morality does not always take precedence over personal desires.

A recent study has also shown the impact of motivated reasoning on consumerism and business at an organizational scale. Noval and Hernandez (2019) demonstrated that through motivated reasoning, people can convince themselves that they are more deserving than others in dilemmas pertaining to resource allocation. This means that people reinterpret information in order to support the idea that they themselves are entitled to a larger share of a resource than other people. The study found that the contextual ambiguity present in many organizations could inadvertently lead to motivated reasoning that would prioritize self-serving, leading to the undermining of the fair allocation of resources, even if decision makers strove to be both fair and honest (Noval & Hernandez, 2019). This demonstrates the effects motivated reasoning can have on a global scale, as it can lead to unethical business practices and encourage

unfair distribution of resources amongst stakeholders.

4. Discussion

This study set out to examine how motivated reasoning can be used, often subconsciously, to justify one's actions or beliefs, and how this justification impacted various fields. In politics, individuals were found to rely heavily on pre-existing party affiliations when making judgements about what to support. For religion, religious beliefs were found to be most often pursued or strengthened based on a person's need for affirmation on life after death. Health issues are typically taken more seriously, with individuals exhibiting a distinct lack of politically motivated reasoning despite politically charged health issues, but attempts to use directional reasoning to justify bad habits or health choices still remain. Finally, in consumer markets, people were able to justify choices with ethical or moral gray ground differently depending on who stood to benefit from said choices, with the most allowances made for decisions or practices that would benefit themselves.

The observations and studies above suggest several conclusions about motivated reasoning.

- 1) People are much more easily persuaded to support something if they believe it is already in line with their beliefs, but struggle significantly more with incorporating potentially conflicting information into their worldview. This can be seen in both the aforementioned politically and religiously motivated reasoning cases, which suggests that people gather evidence to reach a certain desired conclusion whilst simultaneously disregarding other potential avenues of consideration. The study on political agreement also showcases a relatively disturbing trend in people's political attitudes—an inclination to simply vote based on what they believe they should support, rather than a genuine understanding of the issue at hand.

- 2) People's initial beliefs are reinforced by their consumption of sources, and although the collection of evidence to form an opinion is not inherently problematic, as most research is also done in this manner, the sources people choose to collect information from are often the ones that confirm their opinions rather than challenge them. A common example of this in politics would be in the consumption of media, where right-leaning voters typically read articles from right-leaning news sources, while left-leaning voters most often get their information from left-leaning news. Using motivated reasoning, consumers seek out information from outlets they already agree with, and the information given to them by these sources—sources already similar to themselves in ideological belief—confirms what they already believe. As such, they will continue to seek said sources in the future, with repeated reinforcement leading to a strengthening of their beliefs, often to a polarizing degree.

- 3) The threshold, or standard, that people use for believing or accepting evidence seems to shift depending on what evidence is provided—a definitive mov-

ing of the goalposts in order to continue to justify one's own beliefs, even in the face of contradictory evidence. That which is in line with one's beliefs already is met with less difficult requirements, while evidence that may suggest things contrary to what one wants to believe are often subject to the stricter "must I believe this?" rather than a simple "can I". In pervasive issues like health, where a person's belief can directly impact their own body and longevity, it seems imperative that solutions be found to remedy people's biased perceptions.

The relevance of motivated reasoning as a research topic comes from how easily applicable it is to everyday life and its increasing pervasiveness due to the rise of social media. In the current age of technology, rife with information to the point of being overwhelming, social media has created echo chambers that increase motivated reasoning to a higher level. Much of the information people consume online is now personalized, with social media feeds, Google articles, and search engines all designed specifically to feed each consumer what they like to see. As such, people consume an immense amount of information from "like-minded" sources, which can lead to reinforcement of the views towards which an individual is already inclined whilst simultaneously weakening one's ability or desire to seek out and understand opposition (Avnur, 2020). This can intensify the impact people's interests and opinions have on the way they handle evidence, which means that the online echo chamber often results in an increase in motivated reasoning. However, as shown in the Maguire study on attitudes towards COVID-19, as long as people are actively engaged and cognisant when consuming information, motivated reasoning can be combated. Of course, given the ever-increasing flood of information created by the internet and social media, it may become more and more difficult to fact-check and form sound opinions on important health topics, so further research on how to educate people on motivated reasoning and its impacts should be explored.

5. Conclusion

A critical part of good decision-making is having accurate information. When people allow themselves to be misled through motivated reasoning, the outcomes of our suboptimal decisions will most likely be suboptimal as well. In personal affairs, this comes primarily at the cost of health, while more macro-cosmic impacts can be traced to political and consumer decisions. These days, the consumption of media geared to each individual's specific tastes and previous browsing history makes the unwitting creation of echo chambers incredibly easy, which can further emphasize the polarization of the current political climate. Further exploration into confirmation bias, people's tendency to process information by looking for information that is consistent with their existing beliefs, and how it differs from and overlaps with motivated reasoning would also be an interesting avenue of exploration. Luckily, as studies in the field increase, a more holistic view of motivated reasoning is being developed, one that will surely call attention to how motivated reasoning affects many varied aspects of our

lives and encourage people to reason through life a little more carefully.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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