

Questions for week 4, articles on motivated reasoning

Answer ONE of the following questions. Come to class prepared to discuss ALL of them. Essays should be limited to one page single spaced and should have perhaps one-third of the essay describing the issue and the rest analyzing it. It is preferable to go into detail on a small part of the issue, giving examples or illustrations, than to remain at a general level. The devil is always in the details.

1. Start with Lord Ross and Lepper but think of all the readings for the week. Motivated reasoning is often presented as a pathology of human cognition. But aren't there good solid reasons to put new, unexpected, or surprising elements to extra scrutiny? What if you saw an apple go up rather than down, contradicting a belief (gravity) that you hold strongly? Discuss the reasons why humans may have developed the strategy of being skeptical of unexpected information in a positive sense. This may give more understanding of why the effects are so strong.
2. Kunda makes the distinction between having the goal of reaching an "accurate conclusion" and that of reaching a conclusion that supports one's preferred position ("a particular, directional conclusion"). Is motivated reasoning a problem for engineers designing a bridge? How does the nature of the decision affect the likelihood of motivated reasoning? What is the range of decisions where it can be discounted? Where is it more likely?
3. In a book that people don't often read, John Kingdon wrote in *Candidates for Office* (1968!) about the "congratulation / rationalization effect." Winning candidates attribute the victory to their own strategies and implementation of a successful plan; they "congratulate" themselves. Losing candidates do the opposite—they "rationalize" the loss, attributing it to factors beyond their control such as the economy, national trends, or the up-ticket candidates who affected turnout negatively for them. How does this theory fit in with the readings so far?
4. Is it rational to subject surprising bad news to more scrutiny and double-checking than routinely expected good news? Then what do we mean by rational? Is motivated reasoning rational?
5. Figure 1 in Edwards and Smith presents a model in which there is no effort to evaluate an argument that supports one's views. Only disconfirming arguments are scrutinized. Is this a reasonable summary of the idea?
6. Finally, should we be concerned about small subject pools, random sampling, and other elements that are fundamental to the generalizability of political science research. Psychologists are typically much less concerned that we are about the generalizability of their samples. Is that reasonable? Do you think these cognitive processes are likely quite different within different populations, or are these pretty universal human characteristics?