

current
issues
in
social
psychology

Belief Systems and the Perception of Reality

Edited by **BASTIAAN T. RUTJENS**
and **MARK J. BRANDT**

ROUTLEDGE



BELIEF SYSTEMS AND THE PERCEPTION OF REALITY

This book focuses on the social psychology of belief systems and how they influence perceptions of reality. These belief systems, from politics to religion to science, not only shape one's thoughts and views but also can be the cause of conflict and disagreement over values, particularly when they are enacted in political policies.

In *Belief Systems and the Perception of Reality*, editors Bastiaan T. Rutjens and Mark J. Brandt examine the social psychological effects at the heart of the conflict by bringing together contributions under five themes: motivated reasoning, inequality, threat, scientists interpreting science, and people interpreting science. This book aims to create a more integrated understanding of reality perception and its connection with belief systems, viewed through the lens of social psychology.

The synthesis of expert contributors as well as the literature around social psychology and belief systems makes this a unique resource for students, researchers, and academics in behavioral and social sciences, as well as activists and journalists working in this political field.

Bastiaan T. Rutjens is an Assistant Professor in the Social Psychology Program of the Psychology Department at the University of Amsterdam. His research interests are in social and cultural psychology, with a particular focus on the psychological functionings of religious and secular belief systems and worldviews.

Mark J. Brandt is an Associate Professor in the Department of Social Psychology at Tilburg University. He aims to understand ideological and moral beliefs – such as political ideology, religious fundamentalism, and moral conviction – and how they structure attitudes and behaviors, how they provide people with meaning, and why people adopt them in the first place.

Current Issues in Social Psychology

Johan Karremans

Current Issues in Social Psychology is a series of edited books that reflect the state-of-the-art of current and emerging topics of interest in basic and applied social psychology.

Each volume is tightly focused on a particular topic and consists of seven to ten chapters contributed by international experts. The editors of individual volumes are leading figures in their areas and provide an introductory overview.

Example topics include: self-esteem, evolutionary social psychology, minority groups, social neuroscience, cyberbullying and social stigma.

Power and Identity

Edited by Denis Sindic, Manuela Barret and Rui Costa-Lopes

Cyberbullying

From theory to intervention

Edited by Trijntje Völlink, Francine Dehue and Conor Mc Guckin

Coping with Lack of Control in a Social World

Edited by Marcin Bukowski, Immo Fritsche, Ana Guinote & Mirosław Kofta

Intergroup Contact Theory

Recent Developments and Future Directions

Edited by Loris Vezzali & Sofia Stathi

Majority and Minority Influence

Societal Meaning and Cognitive Elaboration

Edited by Stamos Papastamou, Antonis Gardikiotis & Gerasimos Prodromitis

Mindfulness in Social Psychology

Edited by Johan C. Karremans and Esther K. Papies

Belief Systems and the Perception of Reality

Edited by Bastiaan T. Rutjens and Mark J. Brandt

BELIEF SYSTEMS AND THE PERCEPTION OF REALITY

Edited by Bastiaan T. Rutjens and Mark J. Brandt

First published 2019
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2019 selection and editorial matter, Bastiaan T. Rutjens and
Mark J. Brandt; individual chapters, the contributors

The right of Bastiaan T. Rutjens and Mark J. Brandt to be identified
as the authors of the editorial material, and of the authors for their
individual chapters, has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and
78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced
or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other
means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and
recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without
permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks
or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and
explanation without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Rutjens, Bastiaan T., editor. | Brandt, Mark J., editor.

Title: Belief systems and the perception of reality / edited by
Bastiaan Rutjens and Mark Brandt.

Description: New York: Taylor and Francis, [2019] |

Series: Current issues in social psychology

Identifiers: LCCN 2018016970 | ISBN 9781138070806

(hardback: alk. paper) | ISBN 9781138070813 (pbk.: alk. paper) |

ISBN 9781315114903 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Belief and doubt. | Ideology—Social aspects. |

Ideology—Political aspects. | Perception (Philosophy)

Classification: LCC BF773 .B435 2018 | DDC 303.3/72—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018016970>

ISBN: 978-1-138-07080-6 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-138-07081-3 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-11490-3 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo
by codeMantra

CONTENTS

| | |
|---|------------|
| <i>List of contributors</i> | <i>vii</i> |
| Introduction <i>Bastiaan T. Rutjens and Mark J. Brandt</i> | 1 |
| THEME 1 | |
| Motivated reasoning | 7 |
| 1 What is right is right: a three-part account of how ideology shapes factual belief <i>Megan M. Ringel, Cristian G. Rodriguez, and Peter H. Ditto</i> | 9 |
| 2 System-level biases in the production and consumption of information: implications for system resilience and radical change <i>Erin P. Hennes, Adam J. Hampton, Ezgi Ozgumus, and Thomas J. Hamori</i> | 29 |
| THEME 2 | |
| Inequality | 45 |
| 3 Ideology and perceptions of inequality <i>Denise Baron, Jennifer Sheehy-Skeffington, and Nour Kteily</i> | 47 |

vi Contents

| | | |
|--|--|------------|
| 4 | Perceptions of gender inequality in academia: reluctance to let go of individual merit ideology <i>Romy van der Lee and Naomi Ellemers</i> | 63 |
| THEME 3 | | |
| Threat | | 79 |
| 5 | Populism as political mentality underlying conspiracy theories <i>Jan-Willem van Prooijen</i> | 81 |
| 6 | The role of cultural beliefs and existential motivation in suffering perceptions <i>Daniel Sullivan, Roman Palitsky, and Isaac F. Young</i> | 97 |
| THEME 4 | | |
| Scientists interpreting science | | 115 |
| 7 | Direct and indirect influences of political ideology on perceptions of scientific findings <i>Sean T. Stevens, Lee Jussim, Stephanie M. Anglin, and Nathan Honeycutt</i> | 117 |
| 8 | Strategies for promoting strong inferences in political psychology research <i>Anthony N. Washburn and Linda J. Skitka</i> | 134 |
| THEME 5 | | |
| People interpreting science | | 147 |
| 9 | In genes we trust: on the consequences of genetic essentialism <i>Anita Schmalor and Steven J. Heine</i> | 149 |
| 10 | Post-truth, anti-truth, and can't-handle-the-truth: how responses to science are shaped by concerns about its impact <i>Robbie M. Sutton, Aino Petterson, and Bastiaan T. Rutjens</i> | 164 |
| | <i>Index</i> | 179 |

CONTRIBUTORS

Stephanie M. Anglin, Postdoc, Carnegie Mellon University

Denise Baron, PhD Student, London School of Economics and Political Science

Mark J. Brandt, Associate Professor, Tilburg University

Peter H. Ditto, Full Professor, University of California, Irvine

Naomi Ellemers, Full Professor, Utrecht University

Thomas J. Hamori, BS Student, Purdue University

Adam J. Hampton, PhD Student, Purdue University

Steven J. Heine, Full Professor, University of British Columbia

Erin P. Hennes, Assistant Professor, Purdue University

Nathan Honeycutt, PhD Student, Rutgers University

Lee Jussim, Full Professor, Rutgers University

Nour Kteily, Assistant Professor, Northwestern University

Romy van der Lee, Assistant Professor, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Ezgi Ozgumus, Lab Manager, Purdue University

viii Contributors

Roman Palitsky, PhD Student, University of Arizona

Aino Petterson, MSc Student, University of Kent

Jan-Willem van Prooijen, Associate Professor, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Megan M. Ringel, PhD Student, University of California, Irvine

Cristian G. Rodriguez, PhD Student, University of California, Irvine

Bastiaan T. Rutjens, Assistant Professor, University of Amsterdam

Anita Schmalor, PhD Student, University of British Columbia

Jennifer Sheehy-Skeffington, Assistant Professor, London School of Economics and Political Science

Linda J. Skitka, Full Professor, University of Illinois at Chicago

Sean T. Stevens, Research Director, NYU-Stern School of Business

Daniel Sullivan, Assistant Professor, University of Arizona

Robbie M. Sutton, Full Professor, University of Kent

Anthony N. Washburn, PhD Student, University of Illinois at Chicago

Isaac F. Young, PhD Student, University of Arizona

INTRODUCTION

Bastiaan T. Rutjens and Mark J. Brandt

When we started working on this volume, the Brexit referendum had just taken place and President Obama was finishing the final months of his presidency. By the time the first chapters came in, Brexit negotiations had started to sour as campaign promises met economic reality, and the United States had a new president with a unique relationship with the truth. Of course, these are not necessarily new phenomena. The ideas that politicians lie, or at least bend the truth, to fit their political goals and that political campaigns make promises untethered from reality are not unique to this political age. However, the distance between reality and rhetoric might be.

Social psychology has long been concerned with people's perceptions of reality. This might concern relatively everyday perceptions, such as how we perceive the strengths and weakness of our romantic partners (Murray, Holmes, & Giffin, 1996), the detection of sarcasm in email (Kruger, Epley, Parker, & Ng, 2005), and whether wearing our lucky underwear will help us on the football field (Damisch, Stoberock, & Mussweiler, 2010). Humans have a complicated relationship with these perceptions (e.g. Ross & Ward, 1996). We think that we see the world objectively and that other rational people with the same information will see the world in the same way. And so, those people who do not share our views are irrational, ignorant, or worse. This can lead to simple, and sometimes funny, misunderstandings, but it can also play a role in escalating conflict (Kennedy & Pronin, 2008).

The current volume takes a step back. Rather than focusing on how perceptions of reality can lead to misunderstanding and conflict, we focus on how belief systems (i.e. ideological beliefs and worldviews) bias people's view on reality and the facts relevant in that reality in the first place (e.g. Flynn et al., 2017; Ringel, Rodriguez, & Ditto, 2019; Roussos & Dovidio, 2018; Van Bavel & Pereira, in press). Many of the ideas that are covered in this volume, such as

biased information processing, perceptions of social inequality, conspiracy beliefs, trust in science, and ideological polarization, have been hot topics in both academia and public discourse. Nevertheless, in a time when it is necessary to add “fake news” and “post-truth” to our vocabulary, investigating how beliefs shape perceptions of reality seems to be more relevant than ever. The timing of the volume could (unfortunately) not be better.

The goal of this volume is to provide an overview of recent social psychological theorizing and research that examines how belief systems influence perceptions of reality. Belief systems, ranging from the political to the religious and even to the scientific, provide people with a lens to view the world and the events that take place in it. This harbors the potential for conflict and disagreement over values, and how those values are enacted in political policies. These types of conflicts are often studied in social and political psychology, and are at the heart of large literatures related to attitudes, morality, stereotypes, and prejudice.

Value differences and value conflicts *per se* are, however, not the focus of this volume. These differences and conflicts tend to spring from disagreement about how to solve a certain problem and oftentimes involve a trade-off between diverging priorities. However, people’s ideological beliefs can bias how they view reality and lead them to have different perceptions of the actual facts on the ground (e.g. Baron, Sheehy-Skeffington, & Kteily, 2019; van der Lee & Ellemers, 2019) and if those facts should even be distributed to the rest of the population (Sutton, Petterson, & Rutjens, 2019). In other words, there is disagreement not so much about how to solve a certain problem but about whether there is a problem to begin with.

Let us take poverty as an example. Many people agree that poverty exists and is a bad thing that should be alleviated. Value differences, then, create conflict over *how* poverty should be reduced. Should the government reduce taxes so that businesses can hire more motivated people and, as a consequence, poverty is reduced? Or should the government provide cash grants to people in poverty to help them get by? Although this is a contentious debate, it is a debate that agrees on the basic fact: Poverty exists and is bad. However, other debates are less clear-cut. For many topics, people do not only differ on what is the best method to solve the problem, but they also differ on whether there is a problem *to begin with*. These biases in perceptions of reality emerge in a number of domains, such as the perception and interpretation of climate patterns, the ostensible danger of immigrants, the existence of structural social inequality, the interpretation of scientific data, or whether or not political elections are legitimate.

The current volume focuses on these latter questions. How is it that people disagree about the facts on the ground? Why do people perceive reality in diametrical opposite ways? Can these different construals of reality be overcome? The main goal is to bring together social psychologists who examine how people’s belief systems affect their perceptions of reality across diverse domains. We hope that the volume helps to create a more integrated understanding of reality perception and its connection with beliefs and worldviews.

Drawing from research on motivated cognition, their chapter reviews research on whether and when ideologies such as egalitarianism and conservatism are associated with biased perceptions of the degree and nature of social and economic inequality. They also investigate the consequences for support for social change. In Chapter 4, van der Lee and Ellemers focus on perceptions of gender inequality in organizations, with a particular focus on academia. The authors discuss how evidence for gender inequality is often met with skepticism and resistance, and discuss how this relates to individual-merit ideology.

The third theme focuses on how *threat* has a motivational impact on reality perceptions. First, van Prooijen (Chapter 5) discusses how some belief systems create the right environment for conspiracies to flourish, and that populism plays an important role in the creation of conspiracy theories. Populism is argued to consist of three underlying dimensions: anti-elitism, anti-pluralism, and threatened nationalism. Populism causes endorsement of alternative portrayals of reality, often in the form of conspiracy theories. Moreover, these conspiracy theories can in turn further reinforce populist sentiments. The aforementioned political changes of late feature some prominent examples of such conspiracy theories. In Chapter 6, Sullivan, Palitsky, and Young discuss perceptions of reality in the context of suffering. Suffering warrants explanation: why do I or my loved ones suffer? The authors argue that although painful experiences pertaining to suffering may sometimes pressure people toward more accurate accounts of reality, but more often it will be construed in motivated and culturally constructed ways, which are variable and potentially quite detached from reality. In other words, the ideology that goes with one's culture shapes how suffering is construed.

The fourth and fifth themes of the volume focus on how science and scientific evidence is interpreted. First, two chapters discuss how a special kind of people, namely *scientists*, interpret – and conduct – science. Scientists are humans, and so they are prone to ideologically and morally motivated reasoning just like everyone else. There has been much debate about ideological heterogeneity within the scientific community, for example, in the social sciences, and how this can shape the interpretation of scientific evidence. In Chapter 7, Stevens, Jussim, Anglin, and Honeycutt describe how political ideology can direct the processes that produce scientific facts, by influencing what topic should be studied, how to study them, and by shunning researchers and ideas that conflict with the scientists' own political values. It is one thing that ideology makes people more skeptical about certain scientific facts, but it is another (potentially more serious) thing if these facts are themselves partially products of ideology. Washburn and Skitka (Chapter 8) take up the task to come up with ways to minimize the potentially deleterious ways in which ideology shapes social and political psychology research. Building on the classic and influential ideas of Platt (1964) on strong inference, they argue that employing alternative hypotheses to prevent confirmation bias makes for better science. Competing

hypotheses about ideological differences in psychological functioning should consider both flattering and less flattering explanations for human behavior, according to these authors.

The final two chapters focus on how all *other people* (i.e. members of the public) interpret science. Schmalor and Heine (Chapter 9) investigate how essentialist beliefs affect the interpretation of scientific work in genetics, more specifically how it impacts people's understanding of race, gender, and criminality, among other things. Through shaping how people construe facts about the impact of genes on behavior, genetic essentialism has important consequences for science, legislation, and ideological movements. In Chapter 10, Sutton, Petterson, and Rutjens describe how people can be motivated to dispute the truth value of scientific evidence, or even censor and obstruct science, to prevent it from having an adverse impact on society. In other words, when certain scientific findings are perceived to be threatening to collective interests and the common good, people tend to prefer to refute or dismiss the evidence. This "impact bias" has important implications for public understanding of science as well as for how debated about bias in science should be construed.

When considered as a group, the chapters in this volume show that people often differ in what they perceive to be real, or factual, and that these diverging reality perceptions stem – at least in part – from differences in ideologies and beliefs. These perceptions do not reflect anomalous beliefs, or that one side is necessarily right and the other wrong. Rather, what people (like to) believe are facts that maintain their worldview and the social systems in which they operate. To further our understanding of contemporary ideological clashes and polarization, it is important to look beyond (partisan) value conflicts (e.g. disagreements over how we should solve poverty; what is the best way to combat climate change) and acknowledge the existence of stark differences in perceptions of reality (e.g. is poverty a problem; is climate change real).

The next key step for scholars, activists, and others interested in advancing a fact-based social and political discourse is to understand how to correct inaccurate perceptions of reality. Recent work has begun to show how exposure to factual information can be effective in correcting misperceptions (Berinsky, 2017), but not always (Nyhan et al., 2014; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). A key challenge will be to either neutralize the effects of belief systems on motivational and cognitive processes associated with perceptions of reality or to harness those effects to promote a more accurate assessment of the world. This may be done by increasing the motivational oomph of alternative motivations, such as accuracy motivations, by promoting genuine curiosity (Kahan et al., 2017) and rewarding accuracy among both the general public and the pundit class (Prior et al., 2015). We suspect that present and future work that uncovers ways to effectively neutralize the motivational power of belief systems on perceptions of reality and promote accuracy norms will be a major practical contribution of the social sciences to this pressing present-day issue.

References

- Baron, D., Sheehy-Skeffington, J., & Kteily, N. (2019). Ideology and perceptions of inequality. In B. T. Rutjens & M. J. Brandt (Eds.). *Belief systems and the perception of reality*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Berinsky, A. J. (2017). Rumors and health care reform: Experiments in political misinformation. *British Journal of Political Science*, *47*(2), 241–262.
- Damisch, L., Stoberock, B., & Mussweiler, T. (2010). Keep your fingers crossed! How superstition improves performance. *Psychological Science*, *21*(7), 1014–1020.
- Flynn, D. J., Nyhan, B., & Reifler, J. (2017). The nature and origins of misperceptions: Understanding false and unsupported beliefs about politics. *Political Psychology*, *38*(S1), 127–150.
- Kahan, D. M., Landrum, A., Carpenter, K., Helft, L., & Hall Jamieson, K. (2017). Science curiosity and political information processing. *Political Psychology*, *38*(S1), 179–199.
- Kennedy, K. A., & Pronin, E. (2008). When disagreement gets ugly: Perceptions of bias and the escalation of conflict. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *34*(6), 833–848.
- Kruger, J., Epley, N., Parker, J., & Ng, Z. W. (2005). Egocentrism over e-mail: Can we communicate as well as we think? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *89*(6), 925.
- Murray, S. L., Holmes, J. G., & Griffin, D. W. (1996). The self-fulfilling nature of positive illusions in romantic relationships: Love is not blind, but prescient. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *71*(6), 1155.
- Nyhan, B., & Reifler, J. (2010). When corrections fail: The persistence of political misperceptions. *Political Behavior*, *32*(2), 303–330.
- Nyhan, B., Reifler, J., Richey, S., & Freed, G. L. (2014). Effective messages in vaccine promotion: A randomized trial. *Pediatrics*, *133*(4), e835–e842.
- Platt, J. R. (1964). Strong inference. *Science*, *146*, 347–353.
- Prior, M., Sood, G., & Khanna, K. (2015). You cannot be serious: The impact of accuracy incentives on partisan bias in reports of economic perceptions. *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, *10*(4), 489–518.
- Ringel, M. M., Rodriguez, C. G., & Ditto, P. H. (2019). What is right is right: A three-part account of how ideology shapes factual belief. In B. T. Rutjens & M. J. Brandt (Eds.). *Belief systems and the perception of reality*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Ross, L., & Ward, A. (1996). Naive realism in everyday life: Implications for social conflict and misunderstanding. In T. Brown, E. S. Reed, & E. Turiel (Eds.). *Values and knowledge* (pp. 103–135). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Roussos, G., & Dovidio, J. F. (2018). Hate speech is in the eye of the beholder: The influence of racial attitudes and freedom of speech beliefs on perceptions of racially motivated threats of violence. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *9*, 176–185.
- Sutton, R. M., Petterson, A., & Rutjens, B. T. (2019). Post-truth, anti-truth, and can't-handle-the-truth: How responses to science are shaped by concerns about its impact. In B. T. Rutjens & M. J. Brandt (Eds.). *Belief systems and the perception of reality*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Van Bavel, J. J., & Pereira, A. (2019). The partisan brain: An identity-based model of political belief. *Trends in Cognitive Science*.
- van der Lee, R., & Ellemers, N. (2019). Perceptions of gender inequality in academia: Reluctance to let go of individual merit ideology. In B.T. Rutjens & M.J. Brandt (Eds.). *Belief systems and the perception of reality*. Oxon: Routledge.

THEME 1

Motivated reasoning



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

1

WHAT IS RIGHT IS RIGHT

A three-part account of how ideology shapes factual belief

*Megan M. Ringel, Cristian G. Rodriguez,
and Peter H. Ditto*

In the days after Congressman Steve Scalise and three others were shot and wounded while practicing for an annual charity baseball game between Republican and Democratic lawmakers, the calls to inject a more civil tone into America's increasingly toxic political discourse resounded from both sides of the aisle. The sentiment behind those calls for civility was no doubt sincere, but we suspect that many attempts at civil discussion that were initiated by those calls met a similar unfortunate fate. As liberals and conservatives sat down to discuss the issues of the day – taxes, guns, health care, and the rest – their civil intentions were almost certainly tested upon discovering that many of the basic facts underlying their political opinions were not shared by their discussion partners. Republicans citing data showing that low taxes spur economic growth, that more gun owners make communities safer, and that Obamacare is imploding in an irreversible death spiral quickly found their Democratic friends citing data supporting diametrically opposite conclusions on each of these points. As such conversations continued, frustration on both sides was likely to build as each attempt to move toward some productive mutual understanding was stymied by the inability to agree on the ground-level facts that necessarily form the foundation of any attempt at compromise or negotiation. It is tough to have a civil political discussion, let alone a productive one, when the two sides begin that discussion with different sets of facts.

The questions we explore in this chapter concern the causes and consequences of the factual divide between Red (conservative) and Blue (liberal) America. Specifically, we propose a three-part account of how such differential beliefs arise or, more precisely, an account of how prescriptive beliefs (ideologically and morally based beliefs regarding how the world *should be*) shape descriptive ones (“factual” beliefs regarding how the world really *is*). Our account identifies three important

contributing processes: *moralization* (the infusion of issues and events with moral significance); *factualization* (the construction of pseudo-descriptive justifications for moral evaluations); and *socialization* (the reinforcement of morally palatable beliefs by selective exposure to ideologically sympathetic people, groups, and media sources). Our core contention is that the factual gulf between liberals and conservatives is an important contributor to the corrosive polarization that currently afflicts American national politics, not just because the inability to agree on basic ground-level “facts” makes political transactions like negotiation and compromise more difficult, but also because differences in factual belief can fuel negative perceptions and feelings across party lines. If one person believes a fact to be true that another believes just as certainly to be false, it is hard for either one not to see the other as stupid, disingenuous, or both.

Politics, morality, and facts

Politics is and in fact should be about moral vision: individuals and political parties offering their unique vision of what is right and wrong for the country and its citizens, and how to realize that vision through public policy. It is not surprising or odd that people differ in their vision of what constitutes a morally enlightened society, nor that these different moral visions form the basis of major political divisions and coalitions such as that between the left (liberals, progressives, the Democratic party in the United States) and the right (conservatives, traditionalists, the Republican party in the United States). Differences in moral sensitivity and value have the dual function of binding subgroups together in defense and celebration of the shared moral vision of their (liberal or conservative) tribe and driving a wedge between the subgroups as the differences in what each side values and fears translate into real-world conflicts over policies that are alternatively viewed as championing or defiling each side’s vision of a just and moral society (Graham et al., 2013).

Politics seems particularly infused with morality of late. Many key political issues are moral ones – abortion, same-sex marriage – and even issues that are not inherently moral are often seen through a moral lens. Former House Speaker John Boehner spoke of national debt as a “moral threat” (Epstein, 2011), Senator Bernie Sanders called income inequality “the great moral issue of our time” (Schulson, 2016), and former Vice President Al Gore said of climate change that “it is indeed a single, reckless and immoral act if one fails to take his part in addressing this problem” (“Climate Change,” 2010). Imbuing political issues with morality can fuel commitment and spur action in supporters (Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005), but its cost is the implication that the opposition is acting immorally. Polling data reflect this growing animosity as Democrats’ and Republicans’ views of each other have become increasingly negative since the 1960s (Pew Research Center, 2016).

These moral differences are accompanied by different factual beliefs. Perhaps the two most memorable phrases of 2017 were “fake news” and “alternative

facts,” and public opinion data confirm that the political parties show sharp differences in what they believe to be true. For example, 92% of Democrats agree that there is “solid evidence” of global warming, compared to 52% of Republicans (Pew Research Center, 2017), and 80% of Democrats, compared to 33% of Republicans, agree that the “Russian government tried to influence the outcome of last fall’s U.S. presidential election” (Washington Post, 2017). In short, a factual gulf has emerged along ideological lines for many issues. The emergence and consequences of differing moral convictions, each with their associated sets of facts, are what we seek to explain in the sections that follow.

Moralization

In the last two decades, researchers have explored the role of moral attitudes (or moral convictions) in social and political behavior (Skitka et al., 2005). A moral attitude involves the evaluation of an attitude object as fundamentally right or wrong, moral or immoral, rather than a mere preference (Rozin, 1999). Moral attitudes have distinct features, including universality, objectivity, and emotion (Skitka, 2010). Moral attitudes are experienced as universal truths that should apply to everyone, regardless of circumstance or cultural differences. They are experienced as self-evident, objectively true beliefs and are strongly associated with intense emotions, such as disgust or anger, more so than strong nonmoral attitudes. Moral attitudes have unique consequences and predict behavior for which other attitude strength components cannot account (Skitka et al., 2005).

Rozin and colleagues conducted influential work on how commonplace behaviors, such as vegetarianism (Rozin, Markwith, & Stoess, 1997) and cigarette smoking (Rozin & Singh, 1999), become moralized. People may moralize eating meat because something prompts them to see the connection between a moral principle (e.g. not harming animals) and the act of eating meat. Strong affective experiences can also lead to moralization. A person may not be moved to become a vegetarian just by knowing that eating meat harms animals but may be more motivated if they were to watch an emotionally arousing video of a factory farm. Feeling strong emotions, such as disgust, is thought to be part of how cigarette smoking evolved into a moral issue (rather than a matter of taste or preference) in the United States (Rozin & Singh, 1999). The link between strong feelings of disgust and moralized attitudes has been replicated with other issues as well, such as attitudes toward homosexuality (Olatunji, 2008) and obesity (Ringel, 2016).

Political moralization

But how do political issues become moralized? We propose two types of political moralization that often have negative consequences. The first type to consider is what we call *issue moralization*. Issue moralization occurs when people connect broad moral values to specific political issues. Consider the contentious issue of abortion in the United States. Antiabortion proponents may link abortion to one