No good deed goes unquestioned: Cynical reconstruals maintain belief in the power of self-interest

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A B S T R A C T

In four studies, we examined how people maintain beliefs that self-interest is a strong determinant of behavior, even in the face of disconfirming evidence. People reflecting on selfless behavior tend to reconstrue it in terms of self-interested motives, but do not similarly scrutinize selfish behaviors for selfish motives. Study 1 found that people react to new information that selfless behavior is common by interpreting it as more reflective of self-interest. Studies 2a and 2b, applying a Bayesian analysis, demonstrated that people see “too much” self-interest in seemingly selfless actions, given their prior beliefs, but see the predicted amount of self-interest in seemingly selfish actions. This demonstrates that people do not possess internally consistent belief systems, but rather undue cynicism. In Study 3, participants read about real philanthropists whose acts of generosity had been heralded by major news outlets. As participants spent more time considering why such philanthropy was performed, they formed more cynical impressions of the philanthropists’ motives. Beyond offering insight into why belief in the norm of self-interest persists, these studies introduce a novel route by which beliefs resist disconfirmation.

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Social perceivers expect others to be guided by self-interest (Miller, 1999), thinking, for example, that others are less troubled by lying (Kintz, 1977) or cheating on their tax returns (Wenzel, 2005) than are the social perceivers themselves. People incorrectly emphasize how much others’ attitudes toward abortion policy or tobacco control will be self-interestedly guided by gender or smoking status, respectively (Miller & Ratner, 1998). Furthermore, they overestimate the proportion of their peers who will abuse their trust in an economic game (Fetchenhauer & Dunning, 2009, 2010).

Given these substantially inaccurate perceptions, why do people not observe others’ attitudes and behaviors and learn that their own beliefs are overly cynical? One possibility is that people are simply not exposed to disconfirming evidence. For example, Holmes, Miller, and Lerner (2002) demonstrated that the norm of self-interest inhibits people from engaging in acts that appear purely selfless (Ratner & Miller, 2001), which limits the amount of selfless behavior people observe. As a second possibility, a misanthropic memory bias may lead people to disproportionately remember a person’s negative or selfish actions (Ybarra, Stephan, & Schaberg, 2000).

Herein, we discuss another route by which people can maintain a belief in the power of self-interest even when they see evidence that should challenge their beliefs. We propose that people maintain such a belief due to an asymmetry in how they respond to seemingly selfless versus selfish acts, an asymmetry we term attributional cynicism. After further thought, people view behaviors that at first blush seem selfless to be more selfish. For example, once people observe a college woman buying flowers as part of a fraternity charity drive, an initial inclination to praise her (“how charitable!”) may give way to a more cynical interpretation (“what a desperate maneuver to get an invitation to tonight’s fraternity party”). This reflects attributional cynicism.1 In contrast, selfish behavior is taken at face value as selfishly motivated. If a woman refuses to buy flowers, for example, one does not see the social perceiver search for altruistic reasons for the refusal (e.g., “she must have even more important charities to give to!”).

Thus, in reconstruing a seemingly selfless act as more selfish, people tend to shift their beliefs about the action that self-interest would likely promote in the specific situation they are considering. Because of this shift, people should no longer be so confident that self-interest would discourage an actor from performing the seemingly selfless action, thereby protecting their belief in the general prevalence of self-interest. We propose, in a sense, that people

1 The term cynicism refers merely to the content of the attributions, not to the process driving the attributions.

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protect their belief in the norm of self-interest by seeing “too much” self-interest in seemingly selfless acts.

The present research is related to, but ultimately makes qualitatively different claims from past research arguing that people have a specialized ability for detecting self-interest or ulterior motivations in others. Past work has shown that people overcome the ubiquitous confirmation bias (e.g., Wason, 1983) when they are evaluating whether people are following social rules or cheating in a self-interested way (Cosmides, 1989; Cosmides, Tooby, Fiddick, & Bryant, 2005). In a separate program of research, Fein (1996) and Fein, McCloskey, and Tomlinson (1997) have found that people are quick to become suspicious of the ulterior motives of others, which can help them to avoid otherwise robust biases in social perception. In a sense, past work has shown sensitivity and sophistication in the perception of selfishness. Here, we test whether this system may work on overdrive not only to reason well about selfish behaviors, but instead to view the world more generally through a cynical lens.

Four studies tested whether people have a cynical bias when considering seemingly selfless behavior. In Study 1, we gave participants different information about the prevalence of honesty, which at first should seem selfless. We predicted that participants would react to news that most people are honest by seeing honesty as more a product of self-interest. That is, they would revise what behavior they believe self-interest motivates, rather than reducing how much self-interest in general they thought people possessed. Studies 2a and 2b tested whether attributional cynicism occurs without the presentation of new information about the occurrence or prevalence of behaviors. Instead, the studies rely on Bayesian principles to assess whether participants see “too much” (or “too little”) self-interest in seemingly selfless or selfish behaviors. In Study 3, participants learned real-life philanthropists who had been featured in major media outlets. We hypothesized that contemplating the altruistic acts of these individuals would lead participants to become more cynical when explaining these generous actions.

Study 1

Study 1 tested whether people maintain a belief in the norm of self-interest by reading self-interest into seemingly selfless actions—thus maintaining a belief in the overall prevalence of self-interest in others. Some participants were asked to respond to the fact that most college students are academically honest. We predicted participants would respond to such knowledge by: (a) increasing their belief that self-interest will lead students toward academic honesty (i.e., p[honesty | self-interest]), thereby (b) maintaining their belief in the self-interestedness of the population they judged (i.e., p[ self-interest]). Some other participants were told, instead, that a majority of students cheat. We predicted that this information would lead to no revision whatsoever in people’s beliefs about self-interest.

Method

Participants and design
Participants were 26 Cornell University undergraduates. Participants in this and future studies received extra course credit.

Procedure
Participants learned of a purported sociological study of academic dishonesty in America’s colleges and universities. Six bullet points carefully explained what did and did not constitute academic dishonesty. Participants in the majority honest [dishonest] condition were told that the study had been completed, and that it was found that a clear majority (69%) of students had been academically honest [dishonest] in the past thirty days. Participants in a control condition did not receive any information about the results of the survey.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>p(honesty</th>
<th>self-interest)</th>
<th>p(self-interest)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>31.6%</td>
<td>76.9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majority dishonest</td>
<td>30.6%</td>
<td>81.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majority honest</td>
<td>61.5%</td>
<td>75.9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Means in the same column not sharing a subscript differ at the p<.001 level. Those sharing a subscript do not differ at the p<.05 level.

At this point, all participants made two estimates by providing a percentage from 0 to 100:p[ self-interest]. “What percentage of students made their decision mostly due to self-interested (as opposed to selfless) motives?”; and p[ academic honesty | self-interest]. “Of those students whose decision was mostly driven by self-interested motives (as opposed to selfless motives), what percentage of them—in your best estimate—were academically honest?”

Results and discussion

To determine whether learning behavioral base rates affected participants’ theories about how self-interest guided behavior p[ honesty | self-interest]), we first performed a one-way ANOVA, which confirmed that participants’ theories differed by condition, F(2, 23) = 6.17, p = .01. The means are presented in Table 1. Those told that a majority of students were academically honest became more confident that self-interest would lead students to be honest (M = 61.9%) compared to those who were told the opposite (M = 30.4%), t(23) = 3.01, p = .01. Compared to the control condition (M = 31.6%), those in the majority honest condition displayed a shift in their belief that self-interested students would behave honestly, t(23) = 3.04, p = .01. Whereas those in the majority dishonest condition did not show evidence of a shift, t = 1. Such shifts in participants’ beliefs seemed to promote participants’ beliefs in the norm of self-interest. Receiving information about the base rate of academic honesty failed to affect estimates of the percentage of respondents believed to have acted out of self-interest (Ms = 75.9% and 81.8%, for majority honest and dishonest conditions, respectively; t(15) = 1.05, p > .31).

In sum, even with grossly different information about how academically dishonest survey respondents were, participants did not revise their belief about how prevalent the motive of self-interest was. Rather, what participants did alter were their beliefs about which behavior that self-interest was likely to cause.

Studies 2a and 2b

Do the results of Study 1 merely reflect how people engage in Bayesian updating in light of new information, or instead do people twist their construals of seemingly selfless behaviors merely upon further contemplation? Belief updating in light of new information could be a perfectly reasonable response to new information. That is, people may be normative social perceivers with a strong prior belief in the prevalence of self-interest. If so, it would make sense for them to revise their theory to think self-interest is behind high rates of honesty.

Studies 2a and 2b more precisely examine whether cynicism occurs even in the absence of new information. We accomplished this through a novel application of Bayes’ Rule. More specifically, we proposed that an attribution can be expressed as a conditional probability—the likelihood that a behavior is driven by self-interested motives, p[ self-interest | behavior X]. According to Bayes’ Rule, this estimate should be a function of three other beliefs: the likelihood that a person will be self-interested
in deciding how to behave \( (p[\text{self-interest}]) \), the likelihood that the person will choose behavior \( X \) \( (p[\text{behavior } X]) \), and the likelihood that the person would choose behavior \( X \) if it were known that he or she would make such a decision out of self-interest \( (p[\text{behavior } X | \text{self-interest}]) \), such that:

\[
p[\text{self-interest} | \text{behavior } X] = p[\text{self-interest}] \cdot p[\text{behavior } X | \text{self-interest}] / p[\text{behavior } X].
\]  

But would this normative relationship hold? Or would participants make a more cynical attribution for seemingly selfless behaviors than their other beliefs should allow for? By comparing participants' direct judgments of \( p[\text{self-interest} | \text{selfless}] \) to one that can be extrapolated from the other elements of Bayes' Rule (the right side of Eq. (1)), we can assess whether participants were unjustifiably cynical given their prior beliefs. Thus, we could label each participant as overly cynical (direct estimate > extrapolated estimate), internally consistent or realistic (direct = extrapolated), or overly hopeful (direct < extrapolated). Because we provided no additional information about the target's actual behavior, there should be no systematic deviations between participants' direct attributions and those that can be extrapolated from Bayes' Rule.

**Method**

**Participants and design**

One hundred forty-six Yale and Cornell University students participated in Study 2a. Two hundred ninety-four Cornell University students participated in Study 2b.

**Procedure**

Participants read a short fictional story about a college student named Emma (see Appendix A). Emma had been invited by an acquaintance, Frances, to her family's vacation home on Martha's Vineyard for Labor Day weekend. Emma had accepted the offer. However, soon after, Emma's longtime crush Tyler invited Emma to be his date to a fraternity party the night Emma was scheduled to be vacationing with Frances. Thus, Emma faced a dilemma between a seemingly selfless action (honoring her commitment to Frances) and a seemingly selfish one (going with Tyler). Participants in Study 2a first provided three judgments: how likely it was that Emma would go with Frances versus Tyler; how likely it was that Emma's choice would be driven by selflessness or self-interest; and if Emma's choice were driven by self-interest, how likely it would be that she would go with Frances versus Tyler. Participants in 2b answered the same questions, but the more nebulous “self-interest” was replaced by “selfish motives, a concern primarily with her own benefits, interests, welfare, etc.”

Finally, participants in both studies answered whether a decision by Emma to go with Frances or Tyler (manipulated between-participants) would have been driven by self-interest (or “selfish motives, a concern...”) or selflessness (or “selfless motives”). We compared this direct judgment of self-interest to the judgment that could be extrapolated (using Bayes' Rule) from the three initial probability judgments. Crucially, we stressed that in responding to the conditional probability judgments (both \( p[\text{self-interest} | \text{behavior } X] \) and \( p[\text{behavior } X | \text{self-interest}] \)), participants did not actually know what Emma chose or what motivated her decision. In this way, participants' set of beliefs should not systematically depart from internal consistency. We of course expected few participants to display perfect internal consistency in their judgments, but bias can be detected by a systematic, asymmetric departure from Bayes' Rule.

**Results and discussion**

The average response to each individual judgment is listed in Table 2. Confirming our assumption that going on the date with Tyler would be considered the more selfish course of action, \( p[\text{Frances} | \text{self-interest}] \) was less than 50% for both Study 2a, \( t(145) = -6.01, p<.001 \), and Study 2b, \( t(293) = -13.23, p<.001 \). We used Bayes' Rule to compute each participant's extrapolated judgment of self-interest given the hypothetical outcome they judged. Because extrapolated judgments have no upper bound, whereas direct judgments have an upper bound of 100, we recoded extrapolated judgments greater than 100 as 100.

We then compared participants' direct attributions of self-interest, \( p[\text{self-interest} | \text{behavior } X] \), to the one extrapolated from their pre-existing beliefs. Extrapolated judgments were not normally distributed, so we used non-parametric analyses. If the direct attribution was greater than the extrapolated one, we labeled them as a “cynic.” If the two beliefs were equal, they were labeled “realists,” and if their direct attribution was less than their extrapolated estimate, they were labeled as “hopefuls.” The percentage of cynics, realists, and hopefuls, by condition, is listed in Table 3. We of course do not expect all (or even many) participants to be perfectly internally consistent, but we can test for systematic bias by comparing the number of cynics and hopefuls. Thus, the tests below exclude realists.

**Study 2a**

We conducted a logistic regression to assess whether the percentage of cynics versus hopefuls differed by condition. And indeed, a significant interaction showed that those who considered the seemingly selfless act (going with Frances) were more likely to display cynicism (versus hopefulness) than were those who considered the seemingly self-interest action (going with Tyler), \( \chi^2(1, N=122)=6.55, p=.01 \). There were significantly more cynics (69%) than hopefuls (31%) in judging the seemingly selfless act, \( \chi^2(1, N=67)=9.33, p=.002 \), but just as many cynics (45%) as hopefuls (55%) in judging a seemingly selfish decision to go with Tyler, \( \chi^2<1 \). In other words, people perceived more self-interest in the seemingly selfless decision than their prior beliefs permitted, whereas their attributions for a seemingly self-interested decision followed consistently from their prior beliefs.

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Note that because we excluded realists when performing these tests, the percentage of cynics and hopefuls differs from the overall percentages offered in Table 2.
with her own bene
cational cynicism remained.
of self-interest itself. However, in Study 2b, even once self-interest
self-interest should be able to construe any possible future behavior as
self-interested. Someone using this strategy would have judged p(self-
interest) to be high, and p(behavior X) as fairly close to p(behavior X |
self-interest). This is because, according to such a belief system, knowing
that a person will behave in a self-interested manner does not provide
information. And this social perceiver would not be identified as a cynic
by our methods; they would have set up their belief system in a way to
accommodate most any behavior. We imagine that many academic
economists fit this description. Instead, we suggest that as one moves
from considering a choice between a seemingly selfish and selfless act
to considering what motivates a particular selfless action, the very
construal of this act shifts. Thus, combining across these steps, people
start with the sense that the norm of self-interest helpfully distinguishes
behavior when considering why it might occur.

In addition, given the novelty of using Bayes’ Rule as an idiographic
standard for attributions, it is important that participants did not
systematically deviate from Bayes’ predictions when the bias was not
expected, namely, when they were judging an act they already
construed as selfish. Furthermore, the validity of our application of
Bayes’ Rule relies on participants interpreting the term “self-interest”
in a consistent way across their judgments. Study 2b defined “self-
interest” in a more precise way to assure such consistency, and
evidence of attributional cynicism remained.

This latter finding in Study 2b is crucial, for the validity of Bayes’
Rule relies on participants defining self-interest in a consistent way
across their judgments. One might argue that participants in Studies 1
and 2a saw more self-interest after contemplating selfless behavior
because they broadened their definition of the term to be more
inclusive when considering a seemingly selfless act—something akin
to standard economic theory, which asserts that all freely chosen
behavior is self-interested in order to maximize the person’s utility
(Becker, 1976; Swedborg, 1990). Thus, any observed cynicism would
not reflect a shift in one’s attribution for the act, but in one’s definition
of self-interest itself. However, in Study 2b, even once self-interest
was more precisely defined as “selfish motives, a concern primarily
with her own benefits, interests, welfare, etc.” evidence of attributional
cynicism remained.

We wish to further stress the significance of Study 2’s extension of
Study 1. Psychologists are well aware of people’s remarkable talent at
accommodating new information into their belief systems, and it would
be not be terribly novel if this research were merely an additional
presentation of that. But our claim is stronger. Studies 2a and 2b
demonstrate that attributional cynicism does not merely emerge in an
attempt to protect one’s strong belief in the norm of self-interest, nor is it
compatible with an argument that people may “preemptively” shape
their beliefs to make certain that no data can challenge them.

In other words, up front, someone with a strong belief in the power of
self-interest should be able to construe any possible future behavior as
self-interested. Therefore, we were not surprised to find that people
who are committed to self-interest are better at accommodating new
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their beliefs to make certain that no data can challenge them.

Study 2b

Using the more precise definition of self-interest, a logistic
regression analysis found that participants were more likely to be

cynical (versus hopeful) in judging a seemingly selfless act than a
seemingly self-interested act, $\chi^2(1, N = 233) = 5.01, p = .03$. There
were significantly more cynics (60%) than hopefuls (40%) in judging a
seemingly selfless act, $\chi^2(1, N = 124) = 4.65, p = .03$, but just as
many cynics (45%) as hopefuls (55%) in assessing the seemingly
selfish act, $\chi^2(1, N = 109) = 1.11, p > .29$. Thus, merely upon
considering why a selfless act might occur, people assume more
self-interested and selfish motives than their prior beliefs predicted.
Attributional cynicism did not emerge simply because of new
information (as in Study 1), but reflected the cynical spin placed on
seeming selfish behavior when considering why it might occur.

In addition, given the novelty of using Bayes’ Rule as an idiographic
standard for attributions, it is important that participants did not
systematically deviate from Bayes’ predictions when the bias was not
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compatible with an argument that people may “preemptively” shape
their beliefs to make certain that no data can challenge them.

Study 3

Study 3 built on the prior studies in two key ways. First, participants
judged real-world behaviors that had been featured in the news media
because of the extraordinary selflessness these behaviors reflected.
Observing cynicism in reaction to these stories would provide evidence
for the robustness of attributional cynicism. Second, we aimed to more
conclusively test whether it was extra thought, not simply belief
updating in light of new information, that produces cynicism. Thus, all
participants learned of the occurrence of ten philanthropic acts, but
participants spent extra time contemplating only five of these behaviors
before going on to judge all ten behaviors. We expected that this added
thought would prompt cynicism about the five people participants
considered compared to those participants who did not engage in
additional consideration about the same targets.

Method

Participants and design

Two hundred twenty-two Cornell University undergraduates
participated for extra credit toward their grades in psychology and
human development classes.

Materials

We constructed profiles of ten major philanthropists. Of the ten,
five made their mark by donating large sums of money to various
organizations; the other five donated their time or services. We
selected the money philanthropists by randomly choosing five
profiles from Slate Magazine’s 2009 “Slate 60,” an annual list extolling
the year’s biggest money philanthropists (Slate 60, 2009). We selected the time philanthropists by searching Google News for
instances of the phrase “donated time” and selecting appropriate

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Study 2a</th>
<th>Study 2b</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frances (selfless)</td>
<td>Tyler (self-interested)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cynics</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realists</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hopefuls</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\chi^2(1)$</td>
<td>9.33**</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extrapolated attribution</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>80.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amount of cynicism</td>
<td>+13.3%</td>
<td>−2.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The chi-squared statistic comes from a test of whether the number of cynics and hopefuls differ. Cynics are participants for whom their direct judgment of self-interest is greater than their extrapolated judgment. Realists are those for whom their direct judgment equals their extrapolated judgment. Hopefuls are those for whom their direct judgment is less than their extrapolated judgment. The extrapolated attribution is the median extrapolated attribution of self-interest for those participants included in the chi-squared test. The amount of cynicism is the median inflation of the direct judgment compared to the extrapolated judgment (i.e., direct attribution-extrapolated attribution) for those participants included in the chi-squared test.

** $p < .01$.
* $p < .05$. 

philanthropists that had been featured in the media. For each philanthropist, we created a brief profile that included the philanthropist’s picture, his or her source of wealth, and a three-sentence description of the person’s philanthropy (see Fig. 1). So results would not be contaminated by a general bias for or against wealthy individuals, we included a fictitious source of wealth for each time philanthropist.

Procedure
Participants were first exposed to all ten profiles, one at a time, in a random order. Then, participants were told about an attributional thought task: They would be exposed to a random five of the ten profiles again. For these five philanthropists, participants would list up to six reasons why the philanthropist might have performed each act of philanthropy. Just as in real-life judgment contexts, the motivations for giving were not explicitly mentioned in the profiles. After all, person perception is largely an exercise in (reasoned) speculation. To be certain that participants were aware of this, we added, “Because you only have sparse information on which to base these theories, feel free to write down reasons that might be true, even if the information doesn’t allow you to explicitly confirm it.” Money participants completed the attributional thought task for the five money philanthropists, and time participants completed the attributional thought task for the five time philanthropists. By this point, no mention had been made of selfishness or selflessness.

Next, to assess perceptions of selflessness, participants saw all ten philanthropists with a brief phrase reminding participants of each target’s philanthropic contribution. Participants ordered the 10 philanthropists from who they thought was most motivated by selflessness to who they felt was most motivated by selfishness. They then saw all ten profiles again in a new random order. Participants were to indicate to what extent pure selflessness was the likely motivator behind each particular target’s act(s) of philanthropy by providing a response from 1 (pure selflessness) to 9 (pure selfishness). Finally, participants returned to the reasons they had generated earlier. Participants coded each one for whether it reflected a self-interested or selfish motivation, a selfless motivation, or one that was not easily classifiable on this dimension.

Results and discussion
Although there is no standard like Bayes’ Rule by which to identify how much cynicism should be present in participants’ attributions, it is notable just how cynical participants’ explanations for philanthropy were. The average participant generated more selfish reasons for the philanthropy (M = 11.25, SD = 5.80) than selfless reasons (M = 9.70, SD = 4.86), paired t(199) = 2.55, p < .01. A majority of reasons (M = 3.10, SD = 3.24) were not easily classifiable.

To determine whether attributional thought prompted participants to form more cynical impressions, we tested how the extra thought condition impacted rankings and ratings of self-interest. For the rankings, for each participant we calculated the average selfishness ranking given the money philanthropists and the time philanthropists. We then submitted these average rankings to a 2 (extra thought: time or money) × 2 (philanthropists: time or money) mixed-model ANOVA, with only the second variable measured within-subjects. The expected interaction emerged, F(1, 220) = 16.36, p < .001. This reflected that after giving more thought to why either money or time philanthropists donated their resources, participants’ rankings shifted so that philanthropists in the category they focused on became, on average, 0.52 “rankings” more selfish.

One limitation of the rankings measure is that participants may have simply forgotten the information presented in the profiles of the five philanthropists for which they did not generate attributions. To address this possibility, it would be important to observe a similar interaction on participants’ ratings of the each target’s selflessness, which they made only after rereading each full profile. Consistent with the attributional cynicism hypothesis, the same 2 (extra thought: time or money) × 2 (philanthropists) interaction emerged on participants’ average selfishness ratings of each target, F(1, 216) = 19.69, p < .001 (see Fig. 2). Those who had generated reasons why money philanthropists engaged in their acts of charity rated the money philanthropists as more selfish than those who did not.

Average rating in Study 3 of the extent to which the philanthropic acts were motivated by selflessness (versus selfishness) by philanthropic target (money philanthropists vs. time philanthropists) and extra thought condition (money or time). Evidence of attributional cynicism is observed when the selflessness ratings for a target group decline after engaging in extra thought about that target group.

Fig. 1. Two example profiles (Study 3): (a) a money philanthropist, and (b) a time philanthropist.

Fig. 2. Average rating in Study 3 of the extent to which the philanthropic acts were motivated by selflessness (versus selfishness) by philanthropic target (money philanthropists vs. time philanthropists) and extra thought condition (money or time). Evidence of attributional cynicism is observed when the selflessness ratings for a target group decline after engaging in extra thought about that target group.
direction (Studies 2a and 2b). Finally, Study 3 found that such cynicism revision is not simply a necessary consequence of receiving new learning that the prevalence of seemingly self-interested behaviors. No such shift would occur when people considered self-discon...

General discussion

The more people are prompted to consider the self-interested behaviors into more self-interested reasons that participants in the money [time] condition generated, the more they ranked those targets as selfish, r(98) = .25, p = .01 [r(98) = .30, p = .002], and rated the targets’ motivations as selfish, r(98) = .22, p = .03 [r(97) = .32, p = .001]. These results provide the most straightforward support for our hypothesis that it is mere attributional thought (and not necessarily new information) that leads people to twist seemingly self-interested acts into more self-interested beliefs about the power of self-interest even in the face of what should...m of the self-interest construct, but then to fudge their hypothesis-inconsistent results all along. Although we have focused on this process in the context of perceptions of the self-interestedness of others, we believe that this basic process can be used to account for many instances of belief perseverance.

Appendix A

Emma and Frances were acquaintances their freshman year of college. Upon returning to college sophomore year, they found to their surprise that they were living across the hall from each other. Frances, who tends to be shy and socially inhibited, hoped to find a friend in Emma. Frances decided to invite Emma to her family’s lavish Martha’s Vineyard shorefront vacation home for Labor Day weekend. Emma, who has never vacationed outside of her home state of New Jersey, enthusiastically accepted, and Frances immediately began making plans to ensure that the trip would be maximally conducive to bonding.

The day before Emma and Frances are set to leave for Frances’ beach house, Emma is invited by Tyler—a guy she has had a crush on since the beginning of freshman year— to be his date to a party at his fraternity, the very night she is set to be at Martha’s Vineyard with Frances! Knowing Tyler is highly sought after, she fears that by turning him down, the chances of his asking her out again are next to nothing. Also, she worries about the consequences of offending Frances, who she knows has been working hard to make their trip a success.

References


4 It is not the unfalsifiability alone of the belief system that makes the process counternormative. For example, an unfalsifiable belief system that all behavior is self-interested would produce internally consistent beliefs.


