Ideology of the Good Old Days: Exaggerated Perceptions of Moral Decline and Conservative Politics

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Abstract
Beliefs in social and moral decline are widespread, and people sometimes perceive decline when conditions are actually improving. Our research seeks to explain such illusory perceptions of decline by linking them to a general judgmental bias that causes people to mistake change in the self for change in the external world. Many changes that people experience over the course of their lives alter their perspectives in ways that sensitize them to social threats. When people fail to realize that these personal changes have heightened their perceptions of threat, they may mistakenly conclude that threats are becoming more prevalent in society. We test this thesis by combining surveys of people actually undergoing relevant transitions with experimental analogues of these transition processes. We also review evidence linking the belief in social decline to politically conservative attitudes. After examining the judgmental biases that produce illusory perceptions of decline, we draw on broader models of ideology and system justification to explain how the rhetoric of decline may function to achieve wider public support for conservative social movements.

Top five problems in U.S. public schools:

1940:
1. Talking
2. Chewing gum
3. Making noise
4. Running in halls
5. Getting out of turn in line

1980:
1. Drug abuse
2. Alcohol abuse
3. Pregnancy

4. Suicide
5. Rape

These lists, contrasting the top problems facing U.S. public schools in 1940 and 1980, have been widely circulated by pundits, policy-makers, and journalists who cite them as evidence of our rapid social and moral decline (O’Neill, 1994). The vivid image of lost innocence that these lists convey was seized upon by ideologues to advance their critiques of modern life. For instance, William Bennett, a prominent conservative author and cabinet secretary in the Reagan and Bush administrations, cited the lists in his book on cultural decline, The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators (1994). Rush Limbaugh read the lists on his popular right-wing radio program. The conservative journalist George Will and the anti-feminist crusader Phyllis Schlafly cited the lists in their op-ed columns. Tim LaHaye referred to the lists in a book advocating the restoration of traditional family values. In addition to these conservative authors and activists, the lists were also cited by moderates and liberals including Derek Bok, Jocelyn Elders, Ann Landers, and Anna Quindlen.

When Barry O’Neill, a management professor, saw the lists posted on a campus bulletin board, he was intrigued and investigated their origins. Using some careful detective work, O’Neill eventually traced the lists back to their source, a born-again Christian activist named T. Cullen Davis, who used the lists to critique the public education system. When O’Neill asked how he generated the lists, Davis admitted, “They weren’t done from a scientific survey. How did I know what the offenses were in 1940? I was there. How do I know what they are now? I read the newspapers.” Apparently the lists, which had been cited as frightening evidence of the declining trajectory of public morals by experienced journalists, intellectuals, and activists, were based on little more than one man’s hunch.

The odd story of the creation and transmission of Davis’ lists has three features that may help to illuminate the connections linking perceptions of decline, psychological biases, and political ideologies. First, many intelligent people seem to have fallen for this hoax even though it presented an implausibly stark contrast that should have been met with the kind of skepticism that prompted O’Neill to trace the lists back to their dubious origins. The first part of this chapter reviews evidence that exaggerated beliefs in social decline are actually quite widespread, and the lists thus may have been easy to believe because they fit a popular worldview that sees abundant evidence of moral and cultural decay. Second, the procedure Davis used to generate the lists has features that resemble a psychological bias that may be important for understanding why exaggerated beliefs in social decline are so ubiquitous. Davis indicated that his information about school conditions in the
1940s was based on his own direct experiences as a student, whereas his information about contemporary school conditions was derived from media accounts. This raises the intriguing possibility that the change in school conditions that Davis thought he perceived might instead be attributed to the change in his sources of information (direct experience in 1940 versus media accounts in 1980) and the change in his own perspective (student in 1940 versus born-again Christian adult in 1980). The second part of this chapter reviews evidence for a general bias that causes people to mistake changes in their own perspectives for changes in the external world. We argue that this bias can help explain widespread perceptions of decline, because many of the personal changes that people experience as they mature tend to sensitize them to social threats, thus contributing to the illusion that social conditions are, in fact, getting worse. Finally, although the lists were occasionally used by moderates and liberals, they were originally designed to promote a socially conservative agenda. The concluding section of this chapter reviews evidence that perceptions of decline are associated with conservative attitudes, and explores how the illusion of decline provides a political advantage to conservative movements.

WIDESPREAD PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL DECLINE

"Things aren’t the way they used to be." "It’s not like it was in the good old days." "They don’t make things like they used to." These and other similar expressions from everyday life convey the impression that social conditions are changing for the worse. Perceptions of social decline are indeed widespread, and these perceptions are, in many cases, exaggerated when compared with actual trends.

Perceptions of moral decline are particularly common. "Moral decline" was one of the 10 most common themes that respondents listed in 1985 when asked what was the most important event or change that had occurred in the past 50 years (Schuman & Scott, 1989). When people are directly asked about moral change, the majority perceives decline. For instance, in a 1998 Tipp/Christian Science Monitor survey 66% of respondents judged that morality had declined since the 1950s and, in a 1988 CBS News/New York Times Poll, 72% of respondents agreed that there has been "a severe breakdown in moral standards in America." People who are concerned about declining values often emphasize a shift from more socially responsible values to more self-centered values. For instance, in a 1996 survey, 66.5% agreed that "compared to twenty years ago, Americans have become more selfish" (Wolfe, 1998).

It is unclear exactly what people mean when they say that morality has declined. For this reason, it is hard to compare perceptions of moral decline to objective trends. However, many of those who believe that Americans today are less moral and more selfish would no doubt be surprised to learn that rates of volunteering and inflation-adjusted charitable contributions have both increased in recent decades (Ladd, 1999). It seems that, contrary to popular impressions, we have hardly become a nation of selfish free-riders.¹

Even when judgments of decline are more specific and can more confidently be compared with objective trends, the evidence supports the conclusion that these impressions are often exaggerated. In a 1998/1999 survey (Streiterman, Brady, & Tetlock, 1998–1999), 73.7% of respondents judged that crime had increased during the preceding 10-year period despite the fact that crime rates had actually declined dramatically throughout the United States during that period (LaFree, 1999). The belief that children are increasingly neglected by their parents is also common, with 59.6% of respondents in the 1990 General Social Survey (Davis, Smith, & Marsden, 1972–2004) agreeing that the amount of time parents spend with their children is decreasing. However, the quantity of time parents spend with children has actually increased since the 1960s (Sayer, Bianchi, and Robison, 2004). Widespread teenage pregnancy is often cited as an indicator of social decline, but people often exaggerate this problem. For example, in a 2003 poll, 68% of adults judged that teen pregnancy was increasing, despite the fact that teen births had declined by 31% from 1991 to 2002 (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2003). Finally, many people seem to believe the popular "culture war" thesis, which suggests that Americans' values have become increasingly polarized in recent years (Hunter, 1991). For instance, whereas 86% of respondents to a 1996 survey judged that Americans shared more values in the past than they do today (DiMaggio, Evan, & Bryson, 1996), studies tracking trends in American values (Baker, 2004) and political attitudes (DiMaggio, 2003; DiMaggio et al., 1996; Mowu & Sobei, 2001) find little or no evidence of increasing polarization (but see Hunter, 1996, 2006).

¹ When judging the magnitude of social change, people may disagree for a number of reasons, including differences in the temporal reference point they use to define change (Eibach & Ehringer, 2006) and whether the change is framed as a loss or a gain (Eibach & Keegan, 2006). In the case of judging moral change, people's judgments may differ based on how they define what constitutes a moral issue. Haidt and Graham (2007; this volume) provide persuasive evidence that conservative morality is based on a broader set of basic values than the morality of liberals. Furthermore, many of the social changes associated with modern life seem to threaten distinctively conservative values (Haidt & Graham, this volume). Thus, social changes that would seem morally innocuous from a liberal perspective may constitute legitimate evidence of moral decline when considered from a conservative moral perspective.
The popular impression that social conditions are declining is not unique to modern times or Western culture (Murphy, 2005b). Expressions of concern about decline can be found in settings as varied as Ancient Greece and Israel, Confucian China, early Christian Rome, and late 19th century Europe (Herman, 1997; Murphy, 2005b). The prevalence of perceptions of decline over time and across cultures is a clue that these perceptions are often exaggerated, as Robert Bork (1996) argues:

Regret for the golden days of the past is probably universal and as old as the human race. No doubt the elders of prehistoric tribes thought the younger generation’s cave paintings were not up to the standard they had set. Given this straight-line degeneration for so many millennia, by now our culture should be not merely rubble but dust. Obviously it is not: until recently our artists did better than the cave painters (p. 6).

If perceptions of social decline are often exaggerated, then the cross-generational and cross-cultural prevalence of these perceptions suggests that they may be rooted in a general psychological bias. In the next section, we review evidence that the perception of social decline is sometimes the product of the common tendency to mistake changes in oneself for changes in the external world.

MISTAKING CHANGE IN ONESELF FOR CHANGE IN THE WORLD

Throughout their lives, people undergo many changes, including relatively minor changes in expectations or attitudes and more extensive changes like major role transitions. All of these changes have the potential to alter the way a person perceives the world. For example, a person who wins the lottery perceives the mundane pleasures of everyday life to be less enjoyable after sampling the luxuries of wealth (Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978). The fact that people undergo changes that alter their perceptions complicates their attempts to judge how external conditions have changed during their lifetimes. Social scientists face an analogous problem in making inferences about change in the prevalence of a social problem when they have altered the methods they use to track that problem over time. For example, the recorded prevalence of autism has increased dramatically over the past four decades (Wing & Potter, 2002). This apparent rise in prevalence of autism has been attributed to many causes, including childhood vaccinations. However, the criteria for diagnosing autism have broadened substantially over this same period. Thus, at least some of the increased cases must be attributed to the broader diagnostic standards of today compared with the past.

Although professional social scientists can rely on sophisticated models to determine how much an apparent change in a social problem should be attributed to changes in measurement, lay perceivers must rely on the cruder tools of everyday inference when confronting the related problem of determining how much of a change they perceive in external conditions should be attributed to changes in their own attentiveness to those conditions. Much potential for confusion exists when a change in one’s perceptions could be attributed to change in the perceiver, change in the external world, or some combination of both. When facing this confusion, we find that people are prone to exaggerate change in the external world when they themselves have changed in ways that have altered their perceptions. For example, participants whose eating habits became more restrictive over a period of time perceived a greater increase in the prevalence of advertisements for unhealthy foods during that period than did those whose eating habits had remained relatively unchanged (Eibach, Libby, & Gilovich, 2003). In another study, when participants’ arms were fatigued over the course of an experimental session, they perceived an illusory increase in the weight of an object if they lifted that object with their fatigued arm but not if they switched to their other, nonfatigued arm (Eibach, Libby, Ehlinger, & Johnson, 2008).

We argue that this tendency to mistake change in oneself for change in the external world is a consequence of naïve realism, the deep conviction that one’s own perceptual experiences are veridical representations of external reality, unmediated by construal processes (Ross & Ward, 1996; Segall, Campbell, & Herskovits, 1966). When one’s perceptions of external conditions change, naïve realism causes one to begin by assuming that this reflects a true change in the external objects of perception. It takes more active reflection to move beyond this realist assumption and consider the possibility that changes within oneself might be the true source. Consistent with this, we found that participants often will not take into account relevant self-changes as sources of changed perceptions unless they are explicitly prompted to consider how personal changes may have altered their perspectives (Eibach et al., 2003). Moreover, even when people do appreciate the need to take into account the influence of self-changes, they tend to underestimate the influence of these factors because their implicit self-theories often underestimate the magnitude of self-change over time (Ross, 1989). Indeed, experimental manipulations of participants’ theories of self-change influence their judgments of change in the external world; the more participants believe their perspectives have changed over time, the less change they judge has occurred in external conditions (Eibach et al., 2003).

The process of mistaking change in oneself for change in the world is one mechanism that can produce exaggerated judgments of external
change. However, for this process to explain widespread illusions of social decline, we must assume that many of the changes that people undergo as they mature tend to darken their perceptions of the world. We have studied a number of common life transitions that have the potential to increase a person’s sensitivity to the negative aspects of the social world. For each of these personal transitions, we have conducted survey studies of people actually undergoing the transitions and experimental analogue studies designed to test whether the processes of change involved in the transition cause people to perceive an illusory increase in the negativity of external stimuli.

The Transition to Parenthood

Parenthood is a common experience that has the potential to transform the way a person views the world. When a person becomes a parent, the responsibility of taking care of a vulnerable child requires a new type of vigilance, in which the parent is alert to sources of danger that a nonparent could safely ignore. The transition from a nonparental mindset to a more vigilant parental mindset might cause people to perceive an illusory increase in external dangers if they fail to take into account how changes in their vigilance have affected their perceptions. Previously, we documented that parents judge that crime rates are greater in the period after their transitions to parenthood than were crime rates in the period preceding their transitions (Eibach et al., 2003). We also found that people who first became parents in the 1990s believed that crime rates had increased during that decade, even though crime had actually dramatically decreased, as was recognized by both nonparents and those who transitioned to parenthood before the 1990s. These correlational studies suggest that, when people acquire the more danger-sensitive mindset of a parent, they can mistakenly conclude that dangers in the world are becoming more prevalent.

We recently conducted follow-up studies to experimentally test whether the transition from a nonparental to a parental mindset causes a person to perceive an illusory increase in the dangerousness of external stimuli (Eibach et al., 2008). In one of these studies, college students viewed visual stimuli that varied in their level of violent, disturbing content. The stimuli were presented in two blocks, and we manipulated the mindset participants adopted while viewing each block. One condition was designed to mimic the transition to parenthood. While viewing the first block of images, participants judged how peers their own age would be affected by each image. While viewing the second block, they judged how young children would be affected by each image, a task similar to one that actual parents face when they monitor the content of TV shows and Internet sites to protect their children from harmful content. Because the sequence of tasks in this condition required participants to increase their vigilance from block one to block two, this condition represented an experimental analogue of the change in mindset that people undergo when they transition into the parental role. We compared these participants’ judgments of change in the threat of the images to the judgments of control participants who had used the parental mindset while viewing both image blocks and participants who started with the parental mindset while viewing the first block and then shifted to a nonparental mindset while viewing the second block. We predicted and found that, compared with participants in the two control conditions, those who transitioned to a parental perspective judged that there had been a significantly greater increase in the violence and danger of the second block of images, analogous to the illusory perception of increasing crime that real parents perceived when they transitioned into the parental role in our earlier, correlational studies.

Increased Responsibility

Related to the transition to parenthood is the transition from a focus on opportunities in one’s youth to a focus on security in adulthood, when people accumulate responsibilities to their families, workplaces, and communities. For the young person who is unencumbered by such adult responsibilities, the world often seems full of opportunities for new experiences and personal growth. However, for the mature person, the focus often shifts from exploring new options to securing one’s status and fulfilling the more demanding responsibilities of adulthood. This shift from a focus on opportunities and personal growth in early life to a focus on responsibilities and security in adulthood has the potential to significantly alter a person’s perceptions of external conditions. Specifically, the responsibilities and duties associated with adulthood should activate a prevention-focused mindset, sensitizing the person to external risks and dangers. By contrast, the more idealistic orientation of youth is associated with a promotion-focused mindset that is relatively less risk-sensitive (Higgins, 1998).

If the accumulation of responsibilities in adulthood shifts people into a more risk-attentive, prevention-focused mindset, and if people fail to appreciate that maturity changes their perspectives in this way, then this could help explain exaggerated perceptions of increasing threats. We tested this hypothesis in a survey in which adults reported how their goal orientations changed over time (Eibach et al., 2008). Specifically, participants reported whether they had become more focused on opportunities, more focused on responsibilities, more focused on both opportunities and responsibilities, or experienced no change in their goal-focus. Participants also reported their
level of agreement with a number of statements about changes in various social dangers. As predicted, participants who experienced an increase in responsibility-focus perceived a significantly greater increase in social dangers than participants who had not become more responsibility-focused.

We found converging evidence in a laboratory analogue study in which participants perceived an illusory increase in external threats when they were experimentally induced to transition from a promotion-focused to a prevention-focused mindset (Eibach et al., 2008). Participants played a card game with a deck that contained both reward and penalty cards. The critical condition was designed to simulate the transition from a promotion-focused to a prevention-focused mindset. Participants in this condition began the first half of the game with instructions to maximize their acquisition of points (promotion-focus) but then, in the second half of the game, they were instructed to shift to trying to retain as many of their accumulated points as possible (prevention-focus). These participants, who transitioned from a promotion-focused to a prevention-focused game strategy, perceived a significant increase in the quantity of penalty cards in the second half of the game compared with the first half, despite the fact that the quantity of penalty cards was held constant. Participants in two control conditions who were instructed to use a constant prevention-focused or a constant promotion-focused game strategy throughout the session did not perceive an illusory increase in penalty cards.

Physical Aging

We have also found that the effects of physical aging can influence perceptions of social decline. The aging of the body tends to increase the experience of daily frustrations. If people do not appreciate the extent to which increasing frustrations are a consequence of their own physical decline, they may conclude that external conditions are becoming more frustrating in various ways. We tested the specific hypothesis that aging can make driving more frustrating, thus contributing to the belief that other drivers have become more reckless. As predicted, we found that participants perceived a greater increase in the aggressiveness of other drivers over time, the more their own reflexes and coordination had declined with age (Eibach et al., 2008). If this result is a consequence of mistaking change in oneself for change in the world, then the association should be weakened when participants are prompted to take into account self-change as a source of changing perceptions. As expected, the correlation between declining reflexes and the perceived increase in reckless driving was significantly weakened when participants reported change in their own reflexes before judging change in the behavior of other drivers.

Cumulatively, these studies support our hypothesis that the tendency to mistake change in oneself for change in the external world is a source of popular beliefs in social decline. These mistaken beliefs about social change are likely to have political consequences, because beliefs about conditions influence policy preferences, even when those beliefs are inaccurate (Gilets, 2001). In the next section, we explore whether exaggerated perceptions of decline not only affect people’s specific policy preferences but also their broader ideological commitments.

CONSERVATIVE IDEOLOGY AND PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL DECLINE

Conservatism often involves a nostalgic attitude toward the past and defense of traditional social and political arrangements in the face of modern trends (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). In his survey of conservative intellectual history Nisbet (1986) writes, “Conservatives, knowing well the appeal of tradition, the depth in the human mind of nostalgia, and the universal dread of the ordeal of change, the challenge of the new, have rested their indictment of the present frankly and unabashedly on models supplied directly by the past” (p. 93). Sullivan (2006) succinctly captures this nostalgic tendency of conservatism when he writes, “All conservatism begins with loss” (p. 9). Indeed, a lament for the passing of the good old days is a prominent theme in right-wing rhetoric (Jendrisik, 2002), as can be observed in the titles of several popular books by conservative pundits and intellectuals, including William Bennett’s The De-Valuing of America (1994), The Death of Outrage (1998), and The Broken Hearth (2001); Allan Bloom’s The Closing of

2 The label “conservative” is commonly used to refer to several different ideologies. Indeed, the New Right is an often tense marriage of distinct ideologies. One of the broadest distinctions within this movement, at least in the North American context, is the distinction between social and economic/libertarian conservatism (Klatch, 1991). Compared with economic/libertarian conservatives, social conservatives have a stronger commitment to traditional social norms and institutions and therefore are more likely to oppose reforms that introduce new norms or seek to reengineer basic institutions. Economic/libertarian conservatives often resist the conservative label in part because they do not share the traditional conservative’s fear and distrust of social change, unless such change threatens the free market (e.g., Hayek 1960). Since our analysis concerns attitudes toward social change, we are mainly interested in the attitudes of social conservatives rather than those of economic conservatives. Thus, when we refer to conservatives in the text, we are referring primarily to social conservatives. We are also referring to conservatism in the political sense, not the psychological sense (see Jost et al., 2003).
Complaints about moral and cultural decline were also at the heart of opposition to liberalism in the middle-class community studied by Rieder (1985), as the following interview excerpt illustrates:

We were strict, and we respected our parents, but now? This sexual permissiveness is disgraceful, it’s like dogs in the street. … Back then we communicated with relatives, there was a terrific home life, but today they have the idiot box. We are losing respect for the family. … The way of living today, there are no values. People are drifting further and further apart. (pp. 133–134)

Themes of social decline are especially common in the rhetoric of the modern Christian right (Murphy, 2005a). Evangelical and fundamentalist Christian traditions often promote the view that moral decay is a consequence of the increasing exclusion of Christian values from the public square. Smith (1998) found that members of the more conservative evangelical and fundamentalist Protestant faiths were significantly more likely to agree that “Christian values are under serious attack today” and “We are seeing the breakdown of American society today” than were mainline and liberal Protestants. The worldview linking the perceived assault on Christian values with social and moral decay is illustrated in the following excerpt from an interview with a member of the Charismatic evangelical movement:

America started really turning away from Christianity back when Darwinism and evolution came in. Then they took the Bible out of the schools and ever since it seems like America has gone downhill. There used to be higher family values, higher morals, whereas today, you know, anything goes! Even twenty to thirty years ago it was quite different. It is gradually getting worse and worse and worse. (Smith, 1998, p. 137)

These correlational and qualitative findings support an association between conservative attitudes and the belief that society is declining, but they do not illuminate the dynamics of this association. Recent experimental studies provide more definitive evidence that the perception of social decline can influence people to become more conservative. For instance, Duckitt and Fisher (2003) found that people expressed more right-wing authoritarian attitudes after reading about a hypothetical future in which social stability had declined than when they read about a hypothetical future in which conditions had become more secure and another condition in which they read

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2 Although religious fundamentalism and political conservatism are often overlapping ideologies, important distinctions exist. In particular, although the religiously orthodox, including fundamentalists, tend to take conservative stances on most social issues, they are sometimes more economically liberal than moral and religious progressives (Davis & Robinson, 1996, 1999, 2006).
about a future that was very similar to the present. Moreover, the effect of information about change in social conditions on authoritarian attitudes was mediated by the effect of this information on participants' scores on the belief in a dangerous world scale. In another study participants adopted a more punitive law enforcement stance typical of political conservatives after they read a story about a community in which crime and disorder had increased over time, compared with a control condition in which they read about a relatively stable community (Tetlock et al., 2007).

We recently conducted a study to further test whether a worldview emphasizing social decline can cause people to become more conservative. Specifically, we predicted that experimentally inducing people to endorse statements about social decline would change their political self-perceptions, causing them to see themselves as less liberal. Adult participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions designed to manipulate their agreement with statements about decline. We adapted a procedure in which the wording of statements is manipulated to force agreement or disagreement and thereby influence participants' self-perceptions (e.g., Andersen, Lazowski, & Donisi, 1986; Monin & Miller, 2001). In the implausible decline condition, participants read and evaluated statements about social decline that were so extreme that a reasonable person would be forced to reject them (e.g., "All aspects of the world today are more dangerous than when I was a child"). In the plausible decline condition, participants read and evaluated statements about social decline paralleling those in the implausible decline condition, but in this case they were phrased so mildly that a reasonable person would be forced to endorse them (e.g., "Some aspects of the world today are more dangerous than when I was a child").

After recording their agreement/disagreement with the statements in their assigned condition, participants rated their own political identification on a scale ranging from very conservative (coded -3) to very liberal (coded +3), and they also rated their likelihood of voting for a conservative versus a liberal candidate in an election on a scale ranging from very likely to vote conservative (coded -3) to very likely to vote liberal (coded +3). Scores on these two scales were significantly correlated (r(88) = 0.75, p < .05), and they were averaged together for an overall index of political attitudes. As predicted, participants in the plausible decline condition judged themselves to be significantly less liberal (M = 1.07; t(88) = 2.14, p < .05) than participants in the implausible decline condition (M = 0.46).

It may seem counterintuitive that participants were less liberal after being exposed to mild declensionist rhetoric than they were after being exposed to more extreme declensionist rhetoric. However, this finding is consistent with self-perception theory (Bem, 1972), which emphasizes that it is not the information people are exposed to, but rather their behavioral reaction to the information that changes their attitudes. In our study, participants in the implausible decline condition were exposed to declensionist rhetoric that they could easily reject because it was so extreme, whereas in the plausible decline condition, participants were forced to agree with the milder declensionist rhetoric. And having agreed with these sentiments about decline they were then more accepting of conservatism.

WHY ARE PERCEPTIONS OF DECLINE LINKED TO CONSERVATISM?

The belief that social conditions are declining may influence people to become more conservative because decline represents a threat to the social order, and conservatism is often a psychological reaction to such threats (Duckitt, 2001; Jost et al., 2003; Sales, 1972). Right-wing authoritarian attitudes, in particular, are founded on a worldview that emphasizes the ubiquity of social threats and the corresponding need for assertive mechanisms of social control to keep deviancy in check (Duckitt, 2001; Duckitt & Fisher, 2003). This is also consistent with Tetlock's social-functionalist framework, which hypothesizes that perceived threats to the social order motivate people to adopt a more conservative approach to controlling deviance (Tetlock, 2002).

At first glance, the emphasis on social decline may seem inconsistent with preference for the status quo, which is a core feature of conservative ideology (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost et al., 2003). However, by pointing to the alleged destabilizing effects of past social reforms, conservative emphasis on decline may function to defend the status quo from further reforms and "social experiments" (Hirschman, 1991). Moreover, conservative movements occasionally do overtly challenge the existing system (Jost et al., 2003), often in an effort to restore traditional social hierarchies, as in the George Wallace movement (Carter, 2000). An emphasis on social decline may be especially pronounced in these more reactionary versions of conservatism.

The conservative goals of shoring up the traditional social order may seem more sensible to people when they believe that society has lost its moral compass and is drifting toward chaos. Conservative social movements can attract popular support by giving voice to widespread perceptions of decline and offering political remedies. Throughout American history, from the jeremiads of Puritan preachers to Prohibitionism in the early 20th century to the family values campaigns of recent years, reactionary movements have voiced concerns about social and moral decline (Morone, 2003). The rhetoric of decline has also played a prominent role in right-wing movements in other settings. For example, the European eugenic movements in the early
20th century sought to reverse what appeared to be ominous trends toward cultural degeneracy (Schneider, 1991). Concerns about cultural decay also played a role in the rise of Nazism (Stern, 1974). In a study of essays written by 581 early Nazis explaining the motives and circumstances that drew them into the movement, Merkl (1975) found that the decline of German culture was a prominent theme in many essays. The following excerpt from a Nazi essay illustrates this theme:

Whatever virtues were once found among the Germans seemed to have sunk once and for all into the muddy flood. . . . Promiscuity, shamelessness, and corruption ruled supreme. German women seemed to have forgotten their German ways. German men seemed to have forgotten their sense of honor and honesty. Jewish writers and the Jewish press could "go to town" with impunity, dragging everything into the dirt. (p. 173)

A social movement that can represent itself as a response to social decline may have an edge in the competition for public attention because it is able to take advantage of the exaggerated perceptions of decline that people typically experience when they mistake changes in their own perspectives for changes in the external world. Social movements are more successful to the extent that their framings of problems resonate with people's preexisting beliefs and experiences (Babb, 1996; McVeigh, 2004; Snow & Benford, 1988). Our research examining the biases that lead people to mistake changes in themselves for changes in the external world helps explain why decline is such an effective master frame for social conservative movements. The proposition that disorder is increasing is easy for people to believe, because many have undergone changes that enhance the salience of threats to their families and communities, and they ordinarily fail to appreciate the extent to which such personal changes have altered their perceptions. This process produces exaggerated perceptions of decline that conservative movements are able to effectively align with their agenda of defending or restoring traditional social arrangements.

Emphasis on social decline may also offer advantages to conservative movements because decline represents a loss frame, and the motivation to prevent or undo losses is typically more powerful than the motivation to seek gains (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984; Snow, Cress, Downey, & Jones, 1998). The same social change appears more substantial when it is framed as a loss than when it is framed as a gain (Eibach & Keegon, 2006), and people are often willing to take more extreme actions to prevent or undo losses than to achieve new gains (Jervis, 2004; Snow, Cress, Downey, & Jones, 1998). For example, people will cheat on their taxes to avoid financial losses (Robben et al., 1990), and they are willing to make trade-offs involving otherwise protected values in order to avert social losses (Ritov & Baron, 1999). The belief that extreme actions are justified to combat social decline was emphasized by Eric Rudolph, the Olympic Park bomber, explaining his motives for waging a campaign of terror against abortion clinics and gay bars: "The decision to act was the result of many years of my being confronted with the decline of Western civilization and the realization that only radical action would slow or halt this decline" (quoted in Voller, 2006, p. 302).

Although the ability to represent their policies as remedies for social decline offers many advantages for conservative movements, it also entails certain vulnerabilities. Specifically, the illusion of decline that forms a basis of support for conservative movements often is the product of a judgmental bias, then measures that correct that bias may dispel the illusion and thereby undermine the persuasiveness of movements founded on that illusion. The following section reviews a preliminary attempt to test whether interventions that prevent people from mistaking changes in themselves for changes in the external world can reduce the exaggerated perceptions of moral decline that are often prominent themes in conservative discourse.

**CHALLENGING THE IDEOLOGY OF THE GOOD OLD DAYS**

If the failure to consider self-change as a source of changing perceptions influences people to exaggerate social decline, then one strategy for counteracting these exaggerated perceptions is to direct the perceiver's attention to relevant self-changes. As we explained earlier, people are unlikely to spontaneously consider the influence of self-changes because they tend to be naive realists. However, it may be possible to induce people to take into account relevant self-changes by instructing them to reflect on changes in their own perspectives before they evaluate changes in the external world. We tested this hypothesis in a study in which adult participants, who were recruited while attending reunion events at a northeastern U.S. university, judged whether present-day adolescents were more, less, or as moral as adolescents in the participant's own generation. Participants' judgments of moral change were recorded on a scale ranging from -4 (adolescents in my day were much less moral) to +4 (adolescents in my day were much more moral). Half of the participants were assigned to reflect on how their own perspectives on morality had changed since adolescence, immediately before they evaluated changes in the morality of adolescents. This reflection on self-change was designed to prompt participants to consider changes in their own perspectives as a possible cause of their perceptions of moral decline. The remaining participants were assigned to a control condition in which they were not prompted to consider changes in their own moral perspectives before evaluating changes in adolescent morality. Finally, after judging change in adolescent morality,
participants in both conditions evaluated the persuasiveness of three mildly conservative arguments that attributed moral decline to inadequate discipline, lack of upstanding role models, and the corrupting effects of popular entertainment. Persuasiveness judgments were made on a scale ranging from -4 (very unpersuasive) to +4 (very persuasive).

Participants who were induced to reflect on self-change judged that the morality of adolescents had declined significantly less (M = -0.05) than did participants in the control condition (M = 1.17; t(34) = 2.19, p < .05). As a consequence of their greater skepticism about moral decline, participants who reflected on self-change judged the conservative explanations of moral decline to be less persuasive (M = -1.24) than did participants in the control condition (M = 0.26; t(34) = 2.11, p < .05). Finally, in the sample as a whole, perceptions of moral decline were significantly correlated with judgments of the persuasiveness of explanations of decline (r(34) = 0.33, p < .05). These results support our hypothesis that it is the failure to take into account relevant changes in their own past that causes people to develop exaggerated perceptions of decline. The fact that participants found conservative explanations of moral decline less persuasive when they took into account their own changed perspectives suggests that enhancing people's awareness of the perceptual consequences of their own personal changes might be a useful strategy for countering ideological interpretations of social decline.

CONCLUSION

The illusion that conditions are declining is often compelling, as David Hume (1777/1987) emphasized, writing, “The humour of blaming the present, and admiring the past, is strongly rooted in human nature, and has an influence even on persons endowed with the profoundest judgment and most extensive learning.” Hume attributed this illusion to human nature, but a modern social-cognitive analysis allows us to specify the underlying mechanisms more precisely. We provided evidence that exaggerated impressions of social decline are, in part, a product of the human tendency to mistake changes in one's own perspective for changes in the external world. Our research suggests that the illusion of decline is so compelling to people because something truly has changed—namely, their own perspectives. People can honestly claim to see more crime, disorder, and immorality in the world today than they did growing up. However, they fail to realize that they are seeing more of these things because they themselves are different now: now they are worried parents while then they were carefree teenagers, or now they have adult responsibilities while then they were free to explore life's opportunities.

Theory and research has often emphasized how ideology can be a source of biased perceptions (Bem, 1993; Boudon, 1989). Our research looks at the relationship between ideology and bias from the reverse angle, examining how ideologies exploit and give political meaning to preexisting biases in perceptions of social conditions. Specifically, we find that when people fail to realize that personal changes are the source of their perceptions of decline, they are receptive to conservative movements that treat these perceptions as though they are real, offering their own explanations for decline and proposing reactionary solutions. Nostalgia for the good old days may be a phenomenon rooted in illusion, but it is a common and often deeply felt experience that lends itself to ideological elaboration and political exploitation.

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