

Motivated Responsibility Attribution in a Pandemic: Roles of Political Orientation, Perceived Severity, and Construal Level

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Previous research has revealed the significant role of responsibility attribution in crisis communication. Integrating motivated reasoning theory, attribution theory, and construal level theory, this study examined the factors associated with Americans' attribution of responsibility to the Chinese government during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our results, derived from a nationally representative sample, showed that political conservatism was positively associated with the locality and accountability of responsibility attribution. The perceived severity and construal level of attribution related to the locality of attribution, such that those who perceived higher severity and a lower construal level (i.e., more specific attribution) perceived higher internal locality. The findings suggest the need to understand individuals' motivated reasoning in responsibility attribution during crises.

Keywords: attribution of responsibility, issue involvement, severity, political orientation, construal level, pandemic

After the first case of COVID-19 was identified in Wuhan, China, the pandemic spread to 224 countries and affected more than 276 million people by December 2021 (Worldometer, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on the global economy and public health. Coupled with the current geopolitical dynamics between China and the United States, an increasing number of Americans blame the Chinese government for the spread of COVID-19 (Pew Research Center, 2020a), even though the U.S. government missed several opportunities to control the virus since February 2020 (Haberman, 2020). Meanwhile, the international reputation of China has fallen to a historical low, with 73% of Americans holding unfavorable views of China (Pew Research Center, 2020b).

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Given how the pandemic has been politicized (Haberman, 2020), intergroup-related issues, including race-based stigmatization and anti-China sentiments, have grown in importance (Budhwani & Sun, 2020; Roberto, Johnson, & Rauhaus, 2020). According to a national survey by the Pew Research Center (2020c), 40% of respondents believed that it was more common for Americans to express racist views about Asians during the pandemic than it was before. As such, a systematic investigation of Americans' responsibility attribution to China is needed for a better understanding of intergroup attribution during the pandemic.

Research in crisis communication applying attribution theory suggests that people tend to look for entities to blame in a crisis situation (Coates & Tognazzini, 2013; Kelley, 1967). This line of study also supports the essential role of responsibility attribution in determining people's perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors during crises (Coombs, 2016). However, the root cause and sociopsychological mechanisms of such blame have yet to be fully understood. A pandemic, unparalleled by other crises, requires people to make meaning from their unprecedented experiences (Keller et al., 2012). Understanding how individuals in a pandemic attribute responsibility can greatly benefit the burgeoning crisis communication scholarship.

This study aims to unpack the factors affecting Americans' attribution of COVID-19 pandemic responsibility to the Chinese government. Based on motivated reasoning theory (Lodge & Taber, 2005) and defensive attribution theory (Shaver, 1970; Walster, 1966), this study examined the roles of political orientation (e.g., Bisgaard, 2015; Morgan, Mullen, & Skitka, 2010), perceived severity (e.g., Claeys, Cauberghe, & Vyncke, 2010; Song, Sheinin, & Yoon, 2016), and issue involvement (e.g., Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014; Jin, Fraustino, & Liu, 2016) in affecting pandemic responsibility attribution. While previous studies focused on these sociopsychological factors independently in scattered lines of scholarship (e.g., Porumbescu, Moynihan, Anastasopoulos, & Olsen, 2020; Zhou & Ki, 2018), there is a lack of effort examining the joint effects of these variables on responsibility attribution and the outcomes of such attribution (Brown & Ki, 2013) in an impactful global crisis. Extending construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010), this study also investigated the construal level of responsibility attribution and its effect on Americans' attribution of responsibility to the Chinese government.

Using a nationally representative U.S. sample ($N = 768$), we found that political orientation, perceived severity, and construal level were associated with the locality of pandemic responsibility attribution, while political orientation was associated with the accountability of responsibility attribution. Issue involvement interacted with political orientation to affect pandemic evaluations, such that more involved conservatives perceived the pandemic to be more serious and were more likely to believe that the pandemic was caused by internal issues within China. These findings contribute to the crisis communication, political communication, and persuasion literature by furthering our understanding of motivated intergroup responsibility attribution and its determinants during a pandemic.

Pandemic Responsibility Attribution

A pandemic is a public health crisis with a widespread impact on a very large number of people worldwide (World Health Organization [WHO], 2010). Governments in various countries are expected to

handle the pandemic by reducing the spread of the virus. In crisis communication research, responsibility attribution, defined as how individuals place blame, is one of the most important factors in determining the reputational damage a crisis may cause to an organization (see Situational Crisis Communication Theory [SCCT]; Coombs, 2016; Ma & Zhan, 2016). Attribution theory (Kelley, 1967, 1972) aims to understand how people attribute causes to events and such attribution's behavioral outcomes. Attribution, however, can be altered by how information is conveyed (Laczniaik, DeCarlo, & Ramaswami, 2001) and individuals' preexisting notions regarding an entity (e.g., crisis history in SCCT).

Attribution is central to individuals' attitudes and perceptions of a crisis (Coombs, 2016), and it is affected by many factors, such as severity (Claeys et al., 2010; Zhou & Ki, 2018), group status (Anagondahalli & Turner, 2012), or partisanship (Bisgaard, 2015). Past research in crisis communication indicates that attribution relies on individuals' judgment regarding the locality of the cause (whether it is external or internal), intentionality (to what extent the organization purposefully creates the incident), and accountability (whether the organization has resources and the capability to prevent and avoid the crisis) (Brown & Ki, 2013). The SCCT framework places attribution at the center to categorize crisis types into three clusters (victim, accidental, and preventable) and recommend postcrisis response strategies for organizational reputational protection (Coombs, 2016; Ma & Zhan, 2016; Zhao, Zhan, & Ma, 2020). The framework also acknowledges the effects of various crisis attributes and external factors, such as the organization's crisis history, on individuals' attribution (Coombs, 2016), as well as the role of individuals' emotions, such as anger, in their postcrisis responses (e.g., Jeong, 2010).

The literature can be enriched from a more refined understanding regarding the rationale and mechanism behind responsibility attribution because the attribution of responsibility to a nation in a pandemic can be much more complex, being affected by intergroup dynamics, political identities, and pandemic-related beliefs. Focusing on the locality and accountability of responsibility attribution, we discuss how Americans' attribution may be conditioned by motivated reasoning, defensive attribution, and construal level during the pandemic.

Motivated Reasoning in Responsibility Attribution

The expansive literature on political communication and crisis communication suggests that political orientation (e.g., Morgan et al., 2010; Porumbescu et al., 2020) and issue involvement (e.g., Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014; Jin et al., 2016) can be key predictors of responsibility attribution during crises. According to Bisgaard (2015), partisans (i.e., committed conservatives and liberals) selectively attributed responsibilities to the government based on their perceptions of the economic situation in the country. Similarly, other studies show that whether one's party is in office and how well the government has been performing strongly affect how people blame different actors for the harm caused (e.g., Marsh & Tilley, 2010).

Such a phenomenon can be explained by motivated reasoning theory, in which people tend to make attribution in ways to fit their prior beliefs (Gaines, Kuklinski, Quirk, Peyton, & Verkuilen, 2007; Lodge & Taber, 2005). By attributing blame to a party other than one's own party (i.e., an outgroup actor) while avoiding blaming a party one belongs to (i.e., an ingroup actor), one can protect one's personal beliefs (i.e.,

either approval or disapproval of the performance of the Trump administration during the pandemic) and identity to mitigate and/or prevent cognitive dissonance. As suggested by Festinger (1957), cognitive dissonance involves the arousal of psychological discomfort upon discrepancies between existing beliefs and incoming information (i.e., information related to one's own party's performance during the pandemic). To avoid dissonance, people can either selectively expose themselves to proattitudinal information to reinforce their own views (Stroud, 2008) and/or avoid future exposure to counterattitudinal information (Tsang, 2019). Following this logic, partisans are anticipated to attribute responsibilities in ways that fit their prior beliefs (Gaines et al., 2007; Morgan et al., 2010).

Political Orientation

Expectations drawn from the motivated reasoning literature coincide with what Morgan and colleagues (2010) found, that is, both conservatives and liberals tend to make responsibility attributions consistent with their political views. Given how frequently former President Trump and the Republican Party have held the Chinese government accountable for the pandemic (Isenstadt, 2020), including the use of the term "Chinese virus," conservatives should have greater exposure to information attributing the responsibility for the pandemic to the Chinese government and community and, in turn, be more likely to blame the Chinese government and Chinese people for this particular health threat. Indeed, Porumbescu and colleagues (2020) have found evidence that conservatives were, in general, more satisfied with the performance of the Trump administration and thus more likely to blame external actors for the threat. In contrast, Democratic leaders have been criticizing the Trump administration for its mishandling of the pandemic (Hudson, 2020). As a result, liberals can be expected to blame the Trump administration rather than external actors, such as the Chinese government.

As supported by motivated reasoning theory (Lodge & Taber, 2005), conservatives are expected to attribute higher responsibility to the Chinese government and thus confirm their prior beliefs (i.e., the Trump administration has done a great job handling the pandemic), while liberals tend to attribute less responsibility to the Chinese government (i.e., the Trump administration should be held responsible for mishandling the pandemic). In addition, selective exposure to information and the presence of echo chambers make the reinforcement of preexisting values and beliefs easy, leading partisans on both sides to different evaluations regarding how the pandemic has been handled (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Stroud, 2008); thus, they attribute the cause of the pandemic to different actors with different rationales.

Furthermore, given how the Trump administration has been accusing the Chinese government of producing and spreading the virus (Hansen, 2020), conservatives (versus liberals) are more likely to perceive the pandemic as preventable rather than accidental. Conservatives likely believe that the pandemic was caused by an internal matter related to the Chinese government and that the pandemic could have been avoided by the Chinese government. According to Jones and Davis (1965), individuals tend to attribute behaviors perceived as preventable to dispositional (internal) causes, while behaviors perceived as accidental are attributed to situational (external) causes. Therefore, by lessening blame on a favored ingroup actor and highlighting blame on a disliked outgroup actor, partisans on both sides should make attributions

of locality and accountability based on their political orientations (Bisgaard, 2015). Overall, we expect people to assign responsibility based on their political orientations.

H1: More conservative individuals are more likely to attribute higher responsibility to the Chinese government, such that they perceive higher internal locality (a) and higher accountability (b).

The Role of Perceived Severity in Responsibility Attribution

Severity refers to the seriousness of a crisis and is often assessed based on the potential social, physical, and psychological damage the crisis causes to the self and others (Claeys et al., 2010). Crisis severity has a negative impact on organizational reputation (Claeys et al., 2010). However, severity, a key indicator of risk and crisis perception measures, is by no means consistent across crisis situations and cultures. Risk perceptions and interpretations can be altered by many factors, such as framing (e.g., Liu & Kim, 2011; Xu, 2018) or source perception (e.g., Hong & Len-Riós, 2015).

Defensive Attribution Theory

Based on defensive attribution theory (Walster, 1966), when an observer attributes responsibility for an incident to an actor, the observer does so to differentiate themselves from that actor, and the tendency to place blame increases with the severity of the incident (Shaver, 1970). In other words, perceivers of an accident are motivated to protect their own reputations and self-esteem when attributing responsibility to the perpetrator. Thus, this category of attributional tendency is termed "defensive attribution" (Shaver, 1970).

Even though, in his three experiments published in 1970, Shaver did not find consistent results regarding the effect of incident severity on attribution, a recent meta-analysis shows that severity indeed increases individuals' attribution of responsibility for an incident to the perpetrator (Robbennolt, 2000). The defensive attribution tendency has also been tested in crisis scenarios (e.g., Laufer, Gillespie, McBride, & Gonzalez, 2005; Song et al., 2016). In their experiment, Zhou and Ki (2018) found that the perceived severity of a crisis affects the attribution of responsibility, but only when a crisis is accidental. Song and colleagues (2016) found that severity negatively affects brand evaluation only when the locus of control is outside the organization. Such research shows that severity plays a role in responsibility attribution during crises, although it is less clear what factors drive perceived severity in the first place.

Another potential limitation of the aforementioned research is that the locality of control was manipulated with a very clear distinction (e.g., an accident caused by a natural disaster versus an accident caused by a flawed product) in an experiment. In other words, these studies first manipulated how responsibility might be attributed and then tested whether the severity of a crisis moderated this preestablished attribution. In actual crises, the locality of control and individuals' attribution can be more ambiguous and complex (Zhao et al., 2020). For example, in Chipotle's *E. coli* crisis in 2016, Twitter users' responsibility attribution varied to a large extent: Some blamed Chipotle for its deficiency in procedures, whereas others blamed external factors such as corporate sabotage (Zhao, Zhan, & Jie, 2018).

Thus, in crises with vague responsibility attribution implications, there may be large variations in responsibility attribution among different publics, and severity could play a more prominent and unique role. The studies mentioned above (e.g., Song et al., 2016; Zhou & Ki, 2018) also seem to confirm this notion that severity affects the attribution of responsibility only when there is much room for interpretation (an accidental crisis as compared with an intentional crisis).

In the current pandemic, there are still lingering doubts regarding the origin of the virus. Much disinformation and many conspiracy theories also exacerbate the ambiguity regarding the locality of pandemic responsibility attribution. Coupled with the political nature of the pandemic (Pew Research Center, 2020b) and the aforementioned effect of political conservatism on responsibility attribution (Hudson, 2020; Porumbescu et al., 2020), Americans' perceptions of crisis severity should also affect their attribution of responsibility to the Chinese government.

H2: The perceived severity of the pandemic makes individuals attribute more responsibility for the pandemic to the Chinese government, which manifests in increased internal locality (a) and accountability (b).

Issue Involvement, Perceived Severity, and Responsibility Attribution

Another important consideration is issue involvement. Issue involvement connotes that an issue has direct consequences on one's personal life (Johnson & Eagly, 1989). In other words, the extent to which one finds the pandemic to be of personal relevance and importance should be taken into account. Previous research has shown that issue involvement increases relevant information consumption (e.g., Jin et al., 2016; Kievik, ter Huurne, & Gutteling, 2012). More important, issue involvement also moderates the effect of information intake (e.g., Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014; Lee & Kim, 2016). According to the elaboration likelihood model (ELM), individuals who are more involved process information in a more thoughtful manner than those who are less involved (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Involved individuals rely on argument quality in determining how persuasive a message is, whereas the noninvolved rely on heuristic cues (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). For example, political orientation can serve as a heuristic cue known as a partisan cue (Arceneaux, 2008). Rather than examining an issue in detail, individuals provided with partisan cues can consume politically consonant information and engage in issue evaluation to confirm their political identities (Jennings, 2019). When acquiring information during the pandemic, individuals with different degrees of issue involvement are therefore expected to consume information differently (Sundar, 2000), relying on either systematic processing or heuristic cues.

While previous research has shown the moderating effect of issue involvement in the context of information acquisition, we expect a similar moderating effect in the context of pandemic evaluation. Coupled with the motivated reasoning hypothesis, we expect issue involvement to interact with political orientation in affecting perceived severity and the attribution of responsibility. During the COVID-19 pandemic, while more involved partisans likely process incoming information more deliberatively, those who are less involved are expected to rely on partisan cues to confirm their political identities. Conservatives with higher issue involvement may better understand the severity of the pandemic through systematic processing, despite how conservative leaders have downplayed the crisis. Following defensive attribution

theory, more involved conservatives are also likely to attribute more responsibility to who they think should be responsible for the pandemic, as compared with conservatives with lower issue involvement. As mentioned, the Chinese government serves as the target of blame in this case given that conservative leaders frequently accused the Chinese government of being responsible for the pandemic (Isenstadt, 2020).

On the other hand, liberals who find the pandemic to be more relevant and important likely engage with pandemic information more systematically and, thus, can better assess the actual magnitude of the pandemic as compared with less involved liberals, who rely on partisan cues. As such, more involved liberals may perceive the pandemic as less severe than liberal leaders, who have stressed the severity of the pandemic. In addition, more involved liberals will attribute less responsibility to the Chinese government because they are motivated to attribute more responsibility to who they believe to be responsible for the incident (i.e., the Trump administration) than less involved liberals.

Therefore, partisans with varying levels of involvement in the pandemic likely process information differently, leading to different evaluations of the pandemic in terms of its perceived severity. Such processes, in turn, affect how individuals attribute responsibility. In this study, we consider both political orientation and issue involvement as antecedents of pandemic evaluation. This consideration is supported not only by the literature on the ELM and crisis communication but also communication mediation models such as the Orientation-Stimulus-Orientation-Response framework (Namkoong, Nah, Record, & Van Stee, 2017; Tsang, Zhao, & Chen, 2021), which often consider political orientation and issue involvement as factors that precede communication outcomes (Nekmat & Ismail, 2019; Overton, Choi, Weatherred, & Zhang, 2020). Following this rationale, issue involvement should play an important role in shaping individuals' subjective evaluation of the pandemic in terms of perceived severity and responsibility attribution. Because no empirical research has directly tested the effect of the interaction between issue involvement and political orientation on the evaluation of a pandemic, we propose the following research question:

RQ1: How does issue involvement interact with political partisanship to affect pandemic evaluation, including perceived severity (a) and responsibility attribution (b)?

Construal Level and Responsibility Attribution

According to construal level theory (CLT), people construe events differently depending on their psychological distance from the events. In fact, CLT argues that psychological distance systematically alters how people mentally construe events (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Individuals mentally construe socially distant events using abstract representations (i.e., high-level construal) and socially close events using concrete representations (i.e., low-level construal).

Recent crisis communication research has shown that participants' construal level of a crisis event significantly affects their crisis responses, including their emotions and behavioral intentions (e.g., Kim & Jin, 2020; Kim, Jin, & Reber, 2020). Kim and Jin (2020) found that the distal construal of a crisis reduces negative emotions and increases supportive behavioral intentions. They attributed this result to the fact that publics perceive the effects of more psychologically distant events as producing fewer negative outcomes.

Moreover, CLT has also been applied to gauge individuals' responses regarding controversial issues, given that individuals' construal levels reflect their cognitive involvement and attention (Theodorakis & Painesis, 2018; Trope, Liberman, & Wakslak, 2007).

Following CLT, in a crisis situation, the more abstractly or distally individuals position themselves with regard to the event (i.e., high-level construal), the less concrete feelings and elaboration those individuals develop and engage in (Kim & Jin, 2020; Kim et al., 2020); thus, they attribute less responsibility to the origin of the crisis. We believe this similar pattern manifests in the current study context and that Americans' construal level of the pandemic at a more proximal or distal level affects how they view the Chinese government. The following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Higher construal level of responsibility attribution is associated with lower attribution of responsibility to the Chinese government, such that more general attribution relates to lower internal locality (a) and accountability (b).

Method

We collected survey data from April 21 to April 26, 2020. An online panel of participants was recruited through Qualtrics. To obtain a nationally representative sample of the U.S. population 18 years and older, quota sampling was conducted based on age, gender, and education. The final sample ($N = 856$) closely resembled the U.S. population. The subjects were ages 18 to 86 years ($M = 46.42$, $SD = 17.29$), and 51.5% were females ($n = 441$). About 37% had received a high school education or less, 52% had a partial or full college education, and the remainder had a graduate degree or above. The subjects reported an average household income ranging from \$50,001 to \$60,000. Table A1 in the appendix¹ summarizes the characteristics of the sample.

Measures

Attribution of Responsibility to China

The measures of locality and accountability were adapted from Brown and Ki's (2013) study. A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted, and its results supported the two dimensions of responsibility attribution. For locality, subjects indicated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with three statements on a 7-point scale, from 1 "extremely disagree" to 7 "extremely agree." These items include "The pandemic was caused by a weakness in China," "Internal issues in China contributed to the pandemic," and "COVID-19 was caused by a problem inside China" ($M = 5.17$, $SD = 1.52$, Cronbach's alpha = 0.86).

Regarding accountability, subjects answered five questions on a 7-point scale: "The pandemic was preventable by the Chinese government," "The Chinese government had the resources to prevent the pandemic from occurring," "The Chinese government could have avoided the pandemic," "The Chinese

¹ For the appendix, see: <https://shorturl.at/btAIQ>

government should be held accountable for the pandemic," and "The Chinese government should be blamed for the pandemic" ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 1.60$, Cronbach's alpha = 0.94).

Issue Involvement

Subjects indicated the extent to which they considered the COVID-19 pandemic to be "unimportant" or "important" and "irrelevant" or "relevant" on a 7-point scale ($M = 6.02$, $SD = 1.60$, Cronbach's alpha = .87).

Political Orientation

Subjects indicated their political orientation on a continuum from 1 "liberal" to 7 "conservative" ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 1.73$).

Perceived Severity

On a 7-point scale ranging from 1 "definitely not" to 7 "definitely likely," subjects indicated their extent of agreement or disagreement with the following three statements: "COVID-19 is serious," "COVID-19 can cause death," and "COVID-19 is more severe than most people realize" ($M = 6.17$, $SD = 1.21$, Cronbach's alpha = .87).

Construal Level of Attribution

An open-ended question was employed to measure the perceived construal level of attribution: "In your opinion, what is the role of China in the COVID-19 outbreak?" For a response to be considered as indicating a high construal level, the response had to be relevant and construed in abstract terms, such as "to tell us what happened" or "to get over this." A low construal level was indicated by the inclusion of specific terms, such as "how the virus escaped the lab" or "a boy in Wuhan caught the coronavirus."

Two graduate students in communication were recruited for coding. After several rounds of training, both coders coded 10% of the responses to demonstrate intercoder reliability (Krippendorff's alpha = .91). The two coders split the task, and each coded half of the remaining responses. Ultimately, 25.6% of responses represented high construal levels, 66.1% represented low construal levels, and 8.3% were irrelevant. Irrelevant data were excluded in subsequent analyses, reducing the sample size to 768.

Covariates

Age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, income level, and news consumption were used as covariates. Subjects were allowed to choose more than one race/ethnicity. About 75% of subjects were Caucasian, 9% were Black, 7% were Hispanic/Latino, 5% were Asian/Pacific Islander, 2% were American Indian/Native American, and 1% chose other races or ethnicities. For subsequent analyses, three dummy variables (i.e., Black, Hispanic, and Asian) were created. News consumption was measured based on the

extent to which subjects looked for news regarding COVID-19 from international, national, and local media on a 7-point scale ($M = 4.76$, $SD = 1.56$, Cronbach's alpha = .74).

Analytical Schemes

To test the hypotheses, a structural equation model was constructed through the R lavaan package (Rosseel, 2012). In the structural model, the exogenous variables included political orientation, issue involvement, perceived severity, and the construal level of attribution, along with all covariates. The endogenous variables included locality and accountability. In the measurement model, any latent construct with three items or fewer was identified by all indicators. One latent construct, accountability, had more than three indicators and was thus identified through the parceling strategy (Little, Cunningham, Shahar, & Widaman, 2002). Figure 1 details how each construct was identified. Maximum likelihood estimation was used. Standard cutoff values of the model-data fit indexes were used for model evaluation (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

To answer the research question concerning how issue involvement and political orientation affect perceived severity, we constructed a main model that reflects the latent interaction between political orientation and issue involvement on perceived severity, which predicts locality and accountability (Figure 2). A match-paired approach (Marsh, Wen, & Hau, 2004) was used to construct two indicators of the latent interaction term, using standardized scores for issue involvement and political orientation. To test other possibilities, we constructed two alternative models that varied the interrelationships among political orientation, issue involvement, and perceived severity (for details, see Figure A1 in the appendix). All models were tested and compared using the Bayesian information criterion (Raftery, 1995) and chi-squared score difference (Table A2).

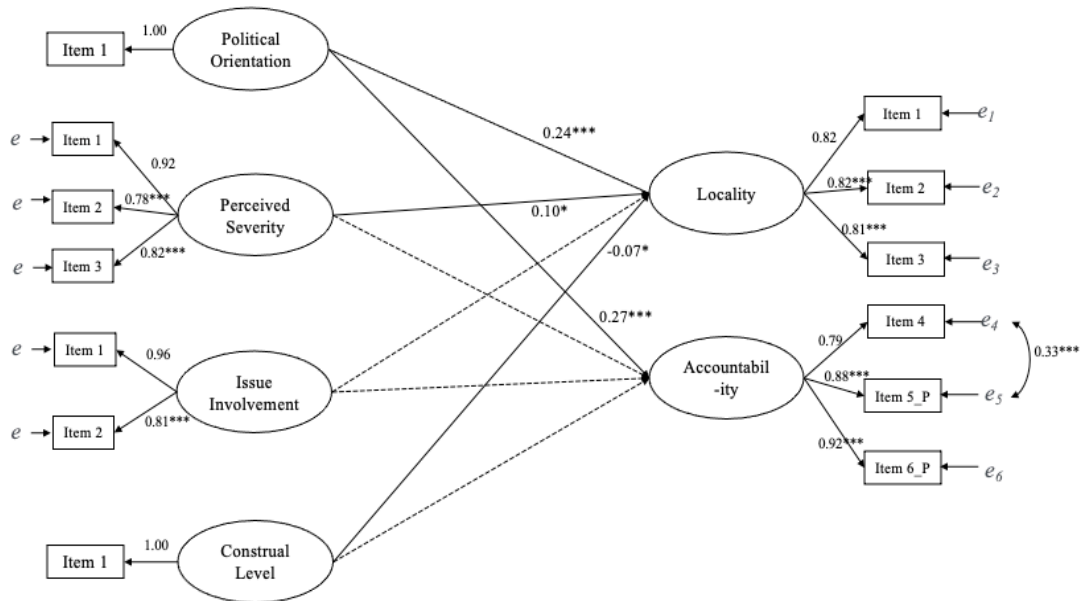


Figure 1. Estimated standardized coefficients in the structural equation model.

Notes. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .001$, * $p < .05$. The covariates were regressed on all endogenous variables, but were not shown in the figure for the sake of simplicity. Accountability was identified by the parceling approach. Namely, the second and third items were averaged to create Item 5_P, and the last two items were averaged to create Item 5_6. For details on these items, refer to the measures section.

Results

Predicting Attribution of Responsibility to China

The model-data fit was acceptable, relative $\chi^2(178, N = 768) = 3.22$, SRMR = 0.058, RMSEA = 0.054, 90% CI RMSEA = [0.049, 0.059], $p = .10$, and CFI = 0.94. The SEM results (Table 1) showed that political orientation ($\beta = .21, SE = 0.03, p < .001$) was positively associated with the locality of attribution, such that those who are more conservative perceived higher internal locality of attribution related to China. H1a was supported. Perceived severity was also positively related to locality ($\beta = .14, SE = 0.06, p < .05$), such that those with higher levels of severity perceived higher internal locality of attribution. H2a was supported. The construal level of responsibility attribution was negatively associated with locality ($\beta = -.25, SE = 0.12, p < .05$), such that those with higher construal levels perceived lower levels of internal locality. H3a was supported.

Regarding accountability, our results showed that political orientation ($\beta = .22, SE = 0.03, p < .001$) was also positively associated with accountability of attribution, such that those who are more conservative perceived higher accountability of attribution related to China. H1b was supported. However,

neither perceived severity nor construal level was associated with the accountability of attribution, disconfirming H2b and H3b.

Table 1. Unstandardized Coefficients and Standard Errors in the Structural Model.

Predictors	Dependent Variables: Responsibility Attribution	
	Locality	Accountability
Control Variables		
Age	.01 (.004)	.01 (.004)
Gender (male = 1, female = 2)	-.39 (.14) **	-.40 (.13) **
Education	-.04 (.07)	-.05 (.06)
Income Level	.05 (.02) **	.05 (.02) **
Race/ethnicity: Hispanic	-.14 (.20)	.14 (.18)
Race/ethnicity: Black	-.17 (.19)	.07 (.17)
Race/ethnicity: Asian	.04 (.27)	-.07 (.25)
News Consumption	.26 (.05) ***	.19 (.04) ***
Theoretical Constructs		
Political Conservatism	.21 (.03) ***	.22 (.03) ***
Issue Involvement	.02 (.05)	.01 (.04)
Perceived Severity	.14 (.06) *	.04 (.06)
Construal Level	-.25 (.12) *	-.12 (.11)
Variance Explained	0.161	0.130

Notes. $N = 856$. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Interaction Between Issue Involvement and Political Orientation

To answer RQ1, regarding how issue involvement and political orientation affect perceived severity and responsibility attribution, a main model (i.e., an interaction model) and two alternative models were tested and compared (Figure A1).

With a good model fit (Figure 2), the main model shows an interaction between issue involvement and political orientation on perceived severity ($\beta = .030$, $SE = 0.014$, $p < .05$). According to the interaction plot in Figure 3, among those who are more conservative, issue involvement was positively associated with perceived severity. In contrast, among those who are more liberal, involvement was negatively associated with perceived severity. Additionally, our model comparison suggests that the main model outperforms Alternative Model 2, but not Alternative Model 1 (see Table A2). Overall, these results lend support for the proposed interaction between political orientation and issues involvement on perceived severity.

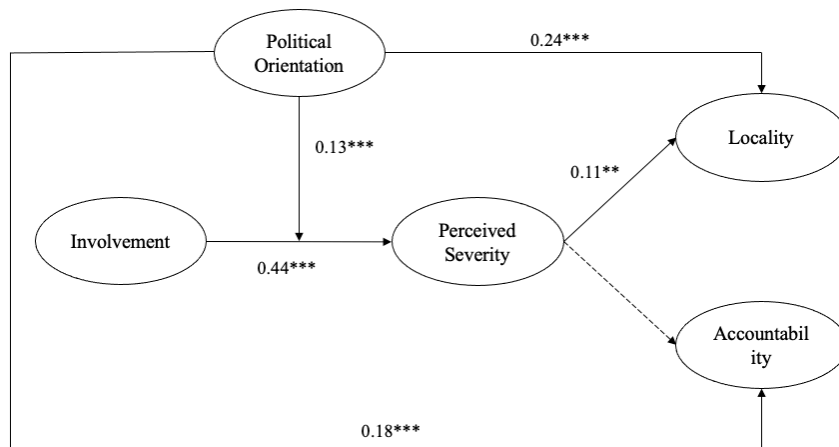


Figure 2. The main interaction model.

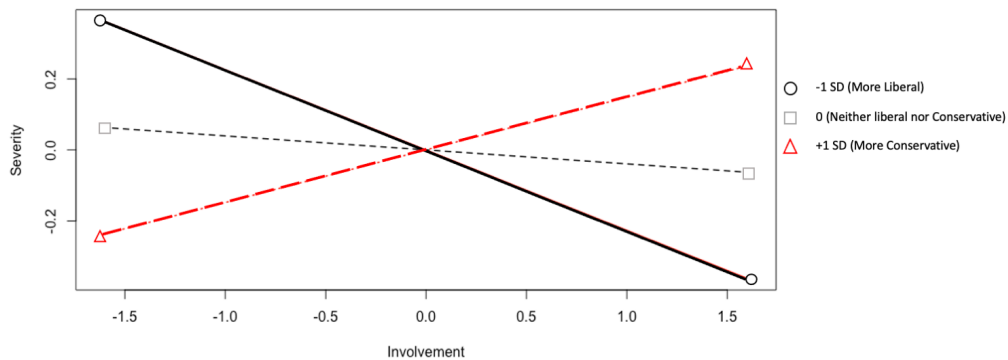


Figure 3. The latent interaction between issue involvement and political orientation.

Discussion

We relied on a nationally representative sample to examine how Americans attributed responsibility to the Chinese government during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, our results showed that political orientation, perceived severity, and construal level were associated with the locality of responsibility attribution, while political orientation was associated with the accountability of responsibility attribution. Also, issue involvement interacted with political orientation to affect perceived severity and responsibility attribution. These results are discussed in detail below.

First, with demographic variables and news consumption being controlled, we found that respondents’ political orientation was associated with their locality and accountability of attribution. Consistent with the motivated reasoning literature (Lodge & Taber, 2005) and emerging evidence (Porumbescu et al., 2020), conservatism was positively related to attribution to the Chinese government.

By attributing responsibility to an outgroup actor, conservatives could preserve their identification as well as their prior approval of the performance of the current administration. Consequently, they were able to avoid psychological discomfort (Festinger, 1957) by blaming an outgroup actor for having caused the pandemic instead of actors from their own party (i.e., the Trump administration).

In addition to providing empirical evidence for motivated reasoning theory (Lodge & Taber, 2005), the findings also imply that, given how frequent the Trump administration and the Republican Party have attempted to hold the Chinese government accountable (Isenstadt, 2020), liberals could see this as a strategy to blame a third party for Republicans' own mishandling of the pandemic (Hudson, 2020). Indeed, consistent with what Porumbescu and colleagues (2020) found, conservatives were more likely to blame external actors for the pandemic than liberals. In general, partisans were found to selectively attribute responsibilities to different actors along party lines (Bisgaard, 2015), depending on whether they approved of the Trump administration's handling of the pandemic.

We also found that respondents' severity perceptions affected how they thought about whether the pandemic was caused by internal issues within the Chinese government (i.e., locality). According to the intergroup communication literature, people do attribute the dispositional locality of control to an outgroup actor who caused the harm (Lickel, Miller, Stenstrom, Denson, & Schmader, 2006), but they can differentiate among various dimensions of attribution with regard to the actors in a pandemic. Our results also support the idea that severity affects responsibility attribution only in situations in which attribution is less clear (Song et al., 2016; Zhou & Ki, 2018). Indeed, the locality of attribution is still uncertain in the pandemic, and this likely explains the moderate association between severity and locality of attribution. It should be noted, however, that perceived severity did not affect Americans' perceptions of whether the pandemic was preventable or the extent to which China should be held accountable for the pandemic. This is probably because the accountability of attribution is less vague (than locality) in the United States. Our results imply that crisis attributes alter responsibility attribution only to the degree that there is variation (ambiguity) in attribution.

Moreover, our results showed that, when asked about the role of China in the COVID-19 outbreak, respondents who responded to the question with a higher construal level in terms of attribution were associated with the lower attribution of responsibility to the Chinese government as compared with those with a lower, more specific construal level. The field of crisis communication has begun to pay attention to the effect of construal level on crisis perception (e.g., Kim & Jin, 2020; Kim et al., 2020). The more abstract the construal level is, the more distal the entity is in cognition, and *vice versa* (Trope & Liberman, 2010). In the current pandemic, a higher construal level (more abstract perceptions of attribution) may suggest individuals' detachment from the event, and this detachment attenuates the valence of negative attitudes and negative behavioral intentions. Thus, it is likely that those who have actively kept up with the pandemic news construe the crisis at a more specific, proximal level regarding China. Similarly, given that the accountability of attribution is less vague than the locality of attribution in the United States, it is not surprising that the effects of construal level on attribution impacted only the locality, not the accountability, of responsibility attribution.

Furthermore, we found that issue involvement interacted with political orientation to affect perceived severity and the locality of responsibility attribution. This supports the role of the elaboration likelihood model in pandemic responsibility attribution (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). While past crisis communication studies have shown that issue involvement moderates the effects of crisis response strategies on crisis evaluation (e.g., Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014), our results highlight how issue involvement moderated the effects of political orientation on pandemic evaluation and attribution. Such a finding may be a result of the political nature of responsibility attribution during the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has aroused not only racist views among Americans (Pew Research Center, 2020c), but conservatives and liberals also were shown to hold diverse views with respect to how well China has handled the pandemic (Pew Research Center, 2020b).

In particular, more involved conservatives perceived the pandemic to be more serious and were more likely to believe that the pandemic was caused by internal issues within China. Although the Trump administration downplayed the severity and importance of the coronavirus (Halon, 2020), conservatives who perceived the pandemic to be relevant and important did not blindly believe that the pandemic was insignificant. Instead, they assessed the pandemic to be more severe than conservatives who were less involved in the pandemic. This is probably because more involved conservatives exhibited higher levels of systematic and deliberative processing of crisis information, following the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Thus, they may have overcome motivated reasoning by systematically weighing various factors (e.g., the spread of the virus in reality, the difficulty of containing the virus, and the mishandling of the Trump administration) rather than simply taking the Chinese government as entirely responsible for the crisis. However, it should be noted that the interaction between issue involvement and political orientation on perceived severity is inconclusive, given that our model comparison analyses did not lend more support to the interaction model than to the first alternative model. Instead of cross-sectional data, time series data should be used to further test the interrelationships among issue involvement, political orientation, and perceived severity in a pandemic.

Theoretical Implications

Taken together, our findings contribute to the crisis communication, political communication, and persuasion literature by showing a promising direction in which to further understand the mechanisms of motivated intergroup responsibility attribution during a pandemic. Because the majority of prior research has examined political orientation and issue involvement independent of the attribution of responsibility (e.g., Jones & Davis, 1965; Morgan et al., 2010), our findings contribute to the literature by showing how issue involvement can potentially assist in ameliorating the motivated reasoning mechanism. Given how political polarization has been rampant in the United States and deterred Americans from taking preventive actions, future studies should continue to study and validate the roles of crisis-related cognitive variables (e.g., issue involvement) in motivated reasoning in crises.

Our results also suggest the importance of communication scholars investigating how various cognitive (e.g., group identification) and affective factors intertwine to affect responsibility attribution. Future research should further test the boundary conditions of the relationships among various factors, such as group identification, issue involvement, and anger toward outgroup members, in individuals'

responsibility attributions, attitudes, and behaviors. Our findings also contribute to the crisis communication literature by stressing the role of perceived severity in responsibility attribution during ambiguous circumstances, in which individuals demonstrate attribution variations.

Furthermore, our study explores the role of the construal level of attribution in crisis communication. Even though understanding antecedents to individuals' construal levels of attribution was not the focus of the current study, such an examination can help to unpack factors outside the existing SCCT framework that can potentially affect attribution. For example, does the construal level of attribution depend on individual trait variables, such as need for elaboration, or crisis-related status variables, such as news exposure? In fact, news exposure has not been well studied in crisis communication research, and studying the effects of individuals' construal levels, because of significant news exposure, on crisis perception and attitudinal outcomes is important. Studying the effects of news exposure on crisis perception and crisis attribution also provides needed implications on organizations' news coverage and media relations in a crisis situation.

Practical Implications

Our results have several practical implications. First, communication professionals should consider all relevant aspects of responsibility attribution, such as locality or accountability, particularly during a crisis with uncertain attribution. Understanding specific aspects of responsibility attribution impacting government reputation can help communication professionals focus on the communication of these aspects. For example, if the public focuses on the locality of attribution and decides their attitudes toward an actor (e.g., the reputation of an organization) based on this aspect of attribution, crisis managers should provide accurate information to address concerns regarding whether the issue is internal or external. Failure to provide such information, particularly during a severe crisis, can damage an actor's (in this case, the Chinese government's) reputation.

Second, individuals have different group identities. It is thus important for communication practitioners to recognize the strong influences of group identity and intergroup dynamics, particularly political identity, on crisis responsibility attribution to outgroup actors during a pandemic. While the conclusion with respect to whether issue involvement enables partisans to recognize the importance of the pandemic and overcome biased perceptions is not definitive, the importance of delivering relevant crisis communication that alleviates the effects of motivated reasoning, specifically biasing people's risk perceptions and intergroup biases, should not be ignored.

Last, because people's construal level of responsibility attribution is also associated with responsibility attribution in a crisis, communication professionals should determine the optimal level of specificity in communicating their responsibility for safeguarding organizational and national reputation, given that it is ethical to do so. During an ongoing pandemic with indefinite attribution, a government can strategically control the degree of specificity related to its crisis responsibility and focus on the open and responsible communication of its corrective actions or renewed commitment.

Limitations and Future Directions

First, even though we have minimized confounding factors through statistical controls, additional variables, such as state of residence, health status, and access to health care, may be important factors in the COVID-19 pandemic. Future research, if possible, should provide more support for the relationships among political orientation, perceived severity, and responsibility attribution by statistically controlling these variables or using a more representative sample that better matches the population in terms of all key demographics. Second, because of our use of observational data, the proposed relationships of constructs may be reversed. Nevertheless, we have alleviated this concern by constructing theory-based competitive structural models and comparing their model-data fit to rule out alternative possibilities (Bollen, 1989). Third, we relied on data collected from respondents in a single nation and thus cannot rule out the role of culture in determining people's responsibility attribution. While public opinion in the United States is plagued by political polarization, people in other countries can demonstrate unique patterns in terms of how they attribute blame to outgroup actors. Future research should explore the impact of culture in responsibility attribution. Furthermore, we measured the construal level of attribution in a binary way using an open-ended question. Because of the constraints of measurement, we did not include construal level in the integrated model, and there could be measurement error associated with this construct. Future research should develop a valid and reliable measurement of the construal level of attribution.

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