

“They Did It On Purpose!”

Motivated Reasoning And The Assessment Of Intentionality For Outgroup Members

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Previous work has established that people view side effects — foreseeable but unsought consequences of an action — as more intentional if the side-effect is harmful than if it is helpful. Two studies test the hypothesis that this bias is more pronounced for outgroup than for ingroup targets. In Experiment 1, football fans judged harmful side effects as more intentional than helpful side effects, especially when judging actions performed by a resident of the rival team’s state. Experiment 2 focused on U.S. respondents’ judgments about ostensibly unintentional civilian deaths resulting from a military conflict. American civilian deaths caused by Iraqi insurgents were more often judged as intentional than Iraqi civilian deaths caused by American troops, and this effect was more pronounced for political conservatives than for liberals. These data support the conclusion that harmful side effects are most likely to be judged as intentional when produced by outgroup members, with the opposite tendency occurring for helpful side effects.