Bias in Favor of the Status Quo

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Abstract

People favor the existing and longstanding states of the world. Rational explanations for status quo maintenance are complemented by a number of non-rational mechanisms; loss aversion, regret avoidance, repeated exposure, and rationalization create a preference for existing states. We show that the status quo also benefits from a simple assumption of goodness due to mere existence and longevity; people treat existence as a prima facie case for goodness, aesthetic and ethical. Longevity increases this preference. These biases operate heuristically, forming barriers to cognitive and social change.

The principle rule of induction is that we expect the future to be like the past. We effortlessly and unconsciously expect gravity to hold us to the ground every morning, we expect water to be wet, ice cream to be cold, that particle physics and brain surgery are difficult and cultivating dandelions is easy. The expectation of stability is critical; it is axiomatic. We expect stasis.

We argue that there are a variety of fundamental judgmental, affective, and aesthetic processes that are affiliated with this expectation that guide our likes and dislikes, and especially our judgments about what is good, desirable, legitimate, and moral. One primary way that our fundamental expectation of stability expresses itself is in a handful of biases that include status quo bias, system justification, the existence bias, the naturalistic fallacy, endowment effect, and the longer-is-better phenomenon. Many of these biases are based in a similar equation about the status quo – what is, is good. Although these terms share much conceptual space, we will distinguish among them to highlight specific psychological processes.

Supporting the status quo can be rational. There are costs to change, and existing states often have the advantage of history, of being well-understood, of having popular support (Burke, 1790/1999). Still, there are a variety of non-rational, psychological processes that enhance the force of status quo maintenance, and this preference in many cases is rightfully labeled a bias.

Rational Routes to Status Quo Maintenance

There are several good reasons to provide ongoing support for existing states. Once a choice has been made, and there is no change in preference or choice set, there should be no shift from the status quo (indeed, it would be irrational, or at least random, to do so). Transaction costs may also prohibit change. Institutions, rules, customs, and habits may not be for the best, but changing them would be too costly in terms of time, money, and/or effort. And often the status quo is genuinely superior to other alternatives.
Cognitive limitations

Choice is often difficult (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000; Schwartz, 2000), and decision makers may prefer to do nothing (Ritov & Baron, 1990) and/or to maintain their current course of action (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988) because it is easier. In this case, the cognitive costs of decision-making may outweigh the benefit of a superior choice. As evidence, decision-makers are more likely to postpone making a decision as alternatives are added (Tversky & Shafir, 1992), and preference for the status quo increases as a function of the number of options (Kempf & Ruenzi, 2006; Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988). Status quo alternatives often require less mental effort to maintain (Eidelman & Crandall, 2009).

Informational limitations

In addition to the cognitive limitations imposed by choice, there are also informational limitations. Decision outcomes are rarely certain, nor is the utility they may bring. Because some errors are more costly than others (Friedrich, 1993; Haselton & Nettle, 2006), sticking with what worked in the past is a safe option that makes for a smart choice. As long as previous decisions are “good enough” (Simon, 1956), an energy-conserving organism in an uncertain world has little impetus to change; in this case, satisficing may be the rational thing to do (Schwartz, Ben-Haim, & Dacso, 2011).

Non-Rational Routes to Status Quo Maintenance

Status quo bias, loss aversion and regret avoidance

Status quo choices are preferred over alternatives. Samuelson and Zeckhauser (1988) defined this status quo bias in a way that conflated decision-makers’ preference to do nothing (i.e., omission bias; Ritov & Baron, 1992; Spranca, Minsk, & Baron, 1991; with a preference to maintain the status quo. When these two biases are disentangled, independent effects for both emerge (Baron & Ritov, 1994; Schweitzer, 1994), with each providing a net gain for previously selected alternatives.

Both “do nothing” and “status quo maintenance” effects are grounded in loss aversion and regret avoidance (Anderson, 2003; Kahneman, Knetsch, & Thaler, 1991). People give more weight to losses than to equal gains (they are “loss averse,” Tversky & Kahneman, 1991). Because the status quo operates as a reference point from which change is considered, the costs of change carry more weight than potential benefits, creating a relative advantage for the existing state of affairs (Moshinsky & Bar-Hillel, 2010). Loss aversion also leads to greater regret for action than for inaction (Kahneman & Tversky, 1982); more regret is experienced when a decision changes the status quo than when it maintains it (Hesketh, 1996; Ritov & Baron, 1992; cf. Inman & Zeelenberg, 2002). Together these forces provide an advantage for the status quo; people are motivated to do nothing or to maintain current or previous decisions (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988). Change is avoided, and decision makers stick with what has been done in the past.

Mere exposure

One way to increase liking for something is repeated exposure over time (Bornstein, 1989; Harrison, 1977; Zajonc, 1968). Stimuli as diverse as words, shapes, music, faces,
and doughnuts have all been shown to become more favorable as a consequence of simple, unreinforced exposure. At the interpersonal level, frequent, incidental contact with others often leads to attraction (Saegert, Swap, & Zajonc, 1973) and friendship (Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1950); contact between social groups leads to more favorable intergroup attitudes as well (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

A related finding is the truth effect: repeated exposure to statements increases their perceived veracity (Bacon, 1979; Hasher, Goldstein, & Toppino, 1977; for a review, see Dechêne, Stahl, Hansen, & Wänke, 2010). Like mere exposure, the truth effect is not specific to any one domain but instead occurs for a broad array of topics, including people, politics, history, art, geography, religion, science, and marketing. The repeated presentation of unfamiliar but plausible statements causes these statements to be seen as more true.

There is some disagreement over the mechanisms involved in these effects (mere exposure effects may be due to conditioning or processing fluency; truth effects may be due to familiarity or source variability), but ultimately both stem from repeated exposure. The biasing consequences in favor of the status quo are clear. Because existing states are encountered more frequently than non-existent alternatives, they will be evaluated more favorably and perceived as more true.

**Rationalization**

People are motivated to justify, defend, and support the status quo. Sometimes existing states are the result of our own choices. People rationalize these decisions, upgrading what was chosen and downgrading what was not (Brehm, 1956). Because people wish to see the world as a just place where people get what they deserve and deserve what they get (Lerner, 1980), victims of misfortune are derogated to explain otherwise inexplicable suffering (Jones & Aronson, 1973; Lerner & Miller, 1978). People are also motivated to justify extant social systems (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004); even members of underprivileged groups rationalize theory own disadvantage by endorsing system-justifying beliefs (e.g., Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2003).

This support for the status quo increases in response to manipulations designed to motivate its defense. When the social system is threatened (e.g., when one’s home country is criticized by an outsider), or when inescapability of the social system becomes apparent (e.g., participants are told emigration from their country is becoming increasingly difficult), justification of the social system increases (Kay et al., 2009). These findings provide strong evidence that some forms of a status quo bias stem from motivation to see the existing state of affairs as good, right, and fair.

**A bias for existence**

Recently we have argued for a novel process that maintains the status quo: the existence bias. People simply assume, with little reason or deliberation, the goodness of existing states (Eidelman, Crandall, & Pattershall, 2009). This idea builds on Hume’s (1739/1992) observation that people tend to conflate matters of fact (what is) with prescription (what ought to be), a process often referred to as the naturalistic fallacy (e.g., Friedrich, Kierniesky, & Cardon, 1989). Hume was concerned with moral matters, but the tendency to conflate existence with goodness applies to a wide variety of judgments. Independent of exposure and contact, concerns due to change, motivation to rationalize, and even reasoned inference, people seem biased in favor of existence. The existence bias operates as a simple rule of thumb; existence itself is evidence of positive qualities.
In a series of studies, we have compared procedures, objects, and other stimuli that differ only in the extent to which they represent the status quo. In one study, students considered one of two sets of degree requirements at their university, of which one represented current practice (Eidelman et al., 2009, Study 2). The status quo version was judged as “better,” more “right,” and “the way things ought to be,” as compared to identical requirement presented as an alternative. Because the status quo was determined randomly (and in this case both alternatives were fabrications), previous exposure fails as an alternative explanation.

Still, people may stick with the status quo because change can have costs. And so we must demonstrate that the existence bias is independent of these concerns—by holding change constant across options. To show that people value the status quo regardless of the costs associated with change, we created a scenario about the future, manipulated its likelihood, and measured how good that outcome would be.

During the 2008 Democratic primary for President of the United States, then-Senators Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton were vying for the opportunity to represent the Democratic Party. We manipulated the likelihood that either Obama or Clinton would win the primary by randomly assigning participants to imagine vividly that Obama/Clinton won the nomination. Imagining an outcome makes it seem more likely (Anderson, 1983; Carroll, 1978), and we conceptualized likelihood as a future status quo. We predicted that imagining an outcome would also make it better, and this is what was found. Imagining Obama (compared to Clinton) winning the primary increased likelihood estimates of Obama winning, and also its goodness and rightness. The increased likelihood mediated the relationship between imagining and evaluation—imagining Obama (or Clinton) winning made it seem more likely, and this in turn increased people’s sense that Obama (or Clinton) winning the nomination was a good thing. Because the current president at the time (George W. Bush) was a second-term Republican unable to run for re-election, Obama and Clinton equally represented change from the status quo.

Most research on status quo bias concerns choice and its consequences (e.g., Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988). To show that existence bias is a broader phenomenon that extends beyond this context, we presented another group of participants with a picture of what was ostensibly a galaxy but in fact was a set of random data points connected by a smooth line (Eidelman et al., 2009; Study 4). Participants were led to believe 40%, 60%, or 80% of galaxies took the form of the one shown, and then rated the galaxy for its aesthetic qualities. As the degree of existence increased, so too did the galaxy’s beauty. Because this between-participants task was completely absent of choice, accounts such as loss aversion and regret avoidance do not hold sway. The context was also independent of motives for justice and system justification, and speaks against rationalization as an alternative account (cf. Jost et al., 2010). It seems that existence itself became persuasive evidence of goodness.

Longer is better

A corollary of the existence bias concerns duration: if existence is good, longer existence should be better. Time vets bad endeavors, and those that persist should be judged more favorably for doing so. This thinking resembles quasi-evolutionary notions of “survival of the fittest,” and also the augmentation principle in attribution theory (Kelley, 1972). In one study, participants were given a brief but (excepting the time manipulation) accurate description of acupuncture, described as existing for 250, 500, 1000, or 2000 years (Eidelman, Pattershall, & Crandall, 2010). Evaluation of acupuncture (whether it was a good
practice and people ought to use it) was a function of time; the longer it was said to exist, the better it was evaluated.

Even negative stimuli benefit from longevity, as demonstrated by a study that focused on the use of torture interrogations in the “Global War on Terror.” A representative sample of Americans read an accurate description of “enhanced interrogations” conducted at the behest of the U.S. Government (Crandall, Eidelman, Skitka, & Morgan, 2009). Some were told these techniques had been used for decades; others were told their use was new. When described as longstanding, the techniques garnered more support and were judged as more justified (although in both conditions, most participants labeled the techniques as torture).

In another study, we manipulated stimulus valence (Eidelman et al., 2009, Study 5). Under the guise of a product-expansion study, students were randomly assigned to taste one of two beverages, either a good-tasting mass-market root beer or a not very good-tasting soft drink, similar to root beer but less sweet and noticeably bitter. Before sampling their beverage, students were told it had been on the market since 1903 or 2003. Regardless of whether they drank a tasty or not-so-tasty drink, the older beverage was preferred to its more recent – but otherwise identical – counterpart. Longer existence made both a bitter and non-bitter beverage better.

**Existence, Longevity, and Heuristic Thinking**

Existence and longevity biases do more than describe a pro-status quo effect; they provide a process explanation for why these effects occur. We argue that these biases operate as quick and simple rules of thumb. From experience, people understand that existence and longevity may indicate some amount of vetting that signals ability, worth, or goodness. People seem to apply this assumption as a simple decision rule; if it exists and maintains, it is good. In other words, these biases are heuristics, for which evidence comes in three forms.

One hallmark of heuristic thinking is over-application; although they often work, rules of thumb are sometimes generalized to contexts where they do not apply (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Several studies show that existence and longevity biases occur on dimensions independent of time in existence (Eidelman et al., 2010). In one study, participants were asked to study a painting said to be 5 or 100 years old. In another, participants were shown a photograph of a tree along with a description that varied only in the tree’s alleged age (500–4500 years). In both cases, aesthetic judgments (e.g., how pleasant the tree was to look at) increased as a function of longevity. A similar case can be made for participants’ aesthetic judgments of the galaxy that varied as a function of time in existence (Eidelman et al., 2009; Study 4). In each case, participants over-generalized assumptions that longer-is-better to what was visually appealing.

Two additional markers of heuristic thinking are efficiency and lack of awareness of the process (Ferreira, Garcia-Marques, Sherman, & Sherman, 2006; Kahneman & Frederick, 2002). Existence and longevity biases share these properties as well. For example, when mental resources are consumed with a second task, preference for status quo options continues unabated (Eidelman et al., 2009). Participants also seem unaware of the role longevity plays in their judgment. In one study, participants’ gustatory evaluations were affected by time in existence; a piece of chocolate thought to be on the market longer tasted better (Eidelman et al., 2010, Study 5). When asked to indicate reasons for their preference, all participants failed to recognize time in existence as a source of their judgment; they seemed to lack access to what in fact affected their taste for a consumer
good. Instead, they simply applied the heuristic, and had a better taste experience as a result.

**Status Quo Biases: Often Subtle, Sometimes Unreasonable**

Other status quo maintenance processes are equally subtle. Initial research on status quo bias invited participants to consider the possibility that position as the status quo affected their choices; this possibility was denied (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988, p. 9). The attitudinal effects of mere exposure are found when stimuli are presented subliminally (e.g., Kunst-Wilson & Zajonc, 1980); indeed these effects are strongest when exposure occurs outside of awareness (Bornstein, 1989; Bornstein & D’Agostino, 1992). Rationalization of existing states seems to be similarly opaque; anterograde amnesics justify their decisions even though they cannot recall the choices they have made (Lieberman, Ochsner, Gilbert, & Schacter, 2001), and members of low-status groups favor dominant groups when this preference is measured implicitly (e.g., Jost, Pelham, & Carvallo, 2002; Rudman, Feinberg, & Fairchild, 2002). Across all of these studies, establishment carried two advantages; it was favored, and participants did not seem to know it.

A lack of awareness does not mean that a process is unreasonable or irrational (e.g., Dijksterhuis, 2004). Repeated exposure without incident indicates a stimulus is safe (Zajonc, 2001), and exposure over time renders stimuli easier to understand and process (Reber, Schwarz, & Winkielman, 2004). These are excellent reasons for a preference.

But there is compelling evidence that in many cases status quo preference is rightfully labeled a bias. People continue to repeat old choices despite the fact “new” decision-makers privy to the same information choose differently (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988). Similarly, the status quo prevails even when there are no costs for change or uncertainty about non-status quo options (Anderson, 2003). Status quo preference due to loss aversion violates the rational principles of consistency and coherence (Moshinsky & Bar-Hillel, 2010; Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). Finally, there’s no accounting for taste; aesthetic and gustatory evaluations are affected by existence and longevity (Eidelman et al., 2009, 2010), although neither is likely to be mediated by reason (e.g., Reber et al., 2004).

Another rational explanation is possible. By simply labeling a stimulus or a process as the status quo, people may assume, quite rationally, that the stimulus or process has passed the inspection of other people. Social norms are often a good guide to correct judgment and conduct; it is reasonable to use the opinions of others as the basis of our own (Sherif & Sherif, 1964).

But this alternative explanation, too, fails to account for the data. Taste preferences come from many sources, but what others like does not appear to be one of them (Birch, 1999). Other people influence when it is appropriate to eat – and how much – but not so much for what we like to eat (Pliner & Mann, 2004). Yet, status quo flavors are tastier. In the chocolate study described above, participants were asked about the preference of others. Although participants believed that others would agree with their tastes (Ross, Greene, & House, 1977), the perceptions of others’ tastes were unaffected by our manipulation of time in existence. Since time in existence affected tastiness but not “others’ perceptions of tastiness,” this rational explanation does not apply.

Economists have taken a serious interest in whether status quo bias and endowment effects (i.e., preferring what we already have) can be explained in ways consistent with rational choice theory. Masatlioglu and Ok (2005) point to the shift in the kind of judgment one makes when a status quo alternative exists. They argue that, in the absence of a status
A Political Implication

Preference for the status quo represents a core component of conservative ideology (Bobbio, 1996; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). Some have claimed there is a conservative bias in American politics (Frank, 2004; Jost, 2006), and the status quo bias we’ve reviewed may play an important role. Because status quo biases should be strongest whenever quick, simple, or efficient thinking dominates thought (Eidelman & Crandall, 2009), these same conditions should increase the appeal of politically conservative ideas. Across several studies, Eidelman, Crandall, Goodman, and Blanchar (forthcoming) measured political attitudes in several ways – all of which contained a substantial element of endorsing the status quo. They found that when low-effort thought dominated (when participants were distracted, under time pressure, fairly drunk, or instructed to think lightly), participants endorsed politically conservative ideas and policies, as compared to those who were able or instructed to deliberate. Because preference for the status quo is one significant element of conservative ideology, the bias in its favor plays a role – under certain conditions – in promoting political conservatism.

Limiting Conditions

In our studies, we have manipulated the existence and longevity of otherwise identical stimuli; across conditions the stimuli themselves remained unchanged. We have never included information in our studies about degradation, about being anachronistic, or indicated that something is stale or shopworn. Certainly some longstanding entities weathered by time and experience will be viewed less positively, in part because such degraded stimuli provide evidence of lower survival value. People may also become bored with stimuli upon repeated exposure (especially when massed, Bornstein, Kale, & Cornell, 1990). Evidence that an entity possesses unfavorable properties may also overcome the evaluative advantages conferred by existence and longevity (although we have found that unpleasant stimuli – questionable interrogation techniques and a bad-tasting beverage – still benefit from time in existence). Our argument is not that change never becomes desirable, nor that the status quo is always preferred; such an argument is patently false. When evidence of the need for change becomes substantial enough, it should outweigh status quo biases. Our argument is only that the scales are not equally balanced at the outset – the status quo alternative begins with a useful advantage.

Future research might test these boundary conditions, and others that speak to what is presumably the underlying (but unrecognized) logic behind existence and longevity biases. We suspect that people implicitly follow a mode of reasoning that resembles belief in “survival of the fittest” by assuming that existence and longevity themselves provide evidence of worth, strength, and goodness. Such an inference requires the additional

 quo alternative, decision makers generate a summary value for all alternatives, but when a status quo option does exist, people compare the status quo and its alternatives on an attribute-by-attribute basis, and will discard the status quo only when an alternative surpasses it on most or all of the attributes. This technical argument indicates that status quo preference can be rational, but not when it will be so. And it fails when the bias occurs outside a choice context, in the absence of alternatives (e.g., when the status quo is operationalized as frequency of occurrence or time in existence). Rational choice does not explain why stars and trees are perceived as prettier when they embody the status quo.
assumption that establishment is due to characteristic properties of the surviving entity and not any of several “artificial” forces (subsidies, absence of competitors, ingroup bias, etc.). Similar to research on the fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977), we believe that social perceivers overweigh internal (natural) explanations for existence and longevity and under-appreciate situational (artificial) forces. Rendering situational forces salient should diminish existence and longevity biases.

Can Newer be Better?

People do, at times, seek novelty. New cars, updated bathrooms, and the latest smart phone all speak to people’s desire for change. Telling is the finding that the pursuit of novelty often occurs in the context of what is familiar, established, and comforting. New product ventures earn higher market shares when linked to established firms (Rao, Chandy, & Prabhu, 2008), minority opinions are most persuasive and influential when consistently repeated (Nemeth & Wachtler, 1974), and children’s preference for novel foods increases when accompanied by familiar flavors (Pliner & Stallberg-White, 2000). In other words, change is pursued, but in the context of a secure base (a primary benefit afforded by the status quo). New living spaces and products people seek are typically updated (“new and improved”) rather than entirely new. Novelty’s strongest commodity can be its foundation in the wisdom of the past.

When considering alternatives, decision-makers seem more concerned about avoiding false positives than false negatives (Friedrich, 1993; Klayman & Ha, 1987). Little is lost when sticking with an outcome that has worked well enough in the past (sufficiency), even though this strategy may result in missed opportunities for something better. Another way to promote change-seeking may be to shift focus from sufficiency to necessity by orienting decision makers away from potential losses and toward potential gains. Under these conditions, people appear to resolve tradeoffs between stability and change by pursuing the latter (e.g., Liberman, Idson, Camacho, & Higgins, 1999).

The Challenge of Change

Bias is rarely recognized as such (Wilson & Brekke, 1994). Even when noticed, a person must then be motivated to overcome it, and have the energy and resources to do so. Change from the status quo faces hurdles on all these fronts. Many of the biases supporting the status quo are invisible, and overcoming them requires awareness and also substantial effort. As we have seen, effort conservation is one mechanism through which status quo maintenance persists (Anderson, 2003; Kempf & Ruenzi, 2006; Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988).

Changing the world is difficult, and so is changing our understanding of the world. As an application, consider scientific and philosophical revolutions. Both meet substantial resistance (Menand, 2001), in part because they require energy, attention, and motivation on the part of scientists and scholars. But they also meet resistance from a sometimes invisible commitment to ideas and concepts based primarily on the basis that they exist and are established (e.g., Garst, Kerr, Harris, & Sheppard, 2002).

We began this essay with the argument that human cognition and behavior is predicated on the notion that the future will be like the past. This “cognitive conservatism” is fundamental to every person in every culture around the world. We expect substantial stasis; life without it would be impossible.
Without the expectation that reality is largely stable, a vast array of psychological processes would be worthless. Learning would never transfer to the future, conditioning would be meaningless, the world would appear completely random, and language would have no value. We are left with the psychological naturalness of the commitment to the status quo, and the difficult and delicate balance between the need for the comfort and predictability it affords, and the questionable but oft-necessary need for change, variety, and transformation.

Short Biographies

Scott Eidelman is an Assistant Professor of psychology at the University of Arkansas. He studied psychology and sociology at the University of Wisconsin, where he received a B.A., and then social psychology at the University of Kansas, where he received his Ph.D. He was Assistant Professor of psychology at the University of Maine from 2004 to 2008 before moving to the University of Arkansas. His research interests include political psychology, stereotyping and prejudice, and identity management strategies.

Chris Crandall studies social and political psychology with experiments, surveys, and field research; work on the status quo and existence bias represents the confluence of work on social and political themes. A professor at the University of Kansas since 1992, he has done research on social pressures and eating disorders, prejudice against fat people, the psychology of attributions, the acceptance of torture, and eating doughnuts in Alaska. He received a B.S in Psychology from the University of Washington, and a Ph.D. in Psychology from the University of Michigan. He has taught at the University of Michigan, Yale University, Connecticut College, the University of Florida and the University of Kansas.

Endnote

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References


