



# Errors in Social Judgment: Implications for Negotiation and Conflict Resolution

## Part 2: Partisan Perceptions

*“We tend to resolve our perplexity arising out of the experience that other people see the world differently than we see it ourselves by declaring that these others, in consequence of some basic intellectual and moral defect, are unable to see things ‘as they really are’ and to react to them ‘in a normal way.’ We thus imply, of course, that things are in fact as we see them, and that our ways are the normal way” (Ichheiser, 1949).*

### Introduction

There is perhaps no more dangerous force in human relations than the human mind. People’s capacities to categorize, interpret, and to project meaning and intent on others go readily leads to the scapegoating, demonization, and stereotyping that escalate and entrench group conflict and hostility. Vexing for both scholars of conflict and conflicting partisans themselves is the question of how to judge the “other side”. Can they be trusted enough to even join them at the table? How far apart are we really? How much of their frightening talk is merely empty rhetoric and posturing, to intimidate us and impress their constituents, and how much of it represents their real positions?

In Part 1 of this note series on errors in social judgment (Biased Assimilation of Information), it was shown how simply holding a certain point of view, or being in a certain role, tends to distort our evaluation of information. It was discussed in that note, how simply giving partisans a balanced set of arguments about a particular issue can cause further polarization, conflict, and undermine negotiation, rather than, as one might initially expect, helping the two sides move closer together. Indeed, any attempt to provide a “neutral” perspective is likely to result in both groups of partisans perceiving the would-be peacemaker as biased in favor of the other side. In this, Part 2 of this series, we will examine some of the ways in which our beliefs, dictated by our own partisanship, affect our views and our understanding of the “other side”, and thereby the dynamics of negotiation and conflict resolution.

### Partisan Interpretations

Beyond the fundamental discovery of that people interpret information in biased and self-serving ways, described in the biased assimilation of information note, conflict scholars have discovered that the existence of an opponent, competitor, or “other side” radically affects the perception of issues and facts. The ways in which partisans understand events and situations can differ so hugely from one side to the other (and from dispassionate consideration of the same facts) that theorists have come to call these views of reality “partisan perceptions”.

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*Professor Robert J. Robinson prepared this note as the basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of an administrative situation.*

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One of the first reports to truly capture the flavor of this dynamic has come to be known as the “They Saw a Game” study<sup>1</sup>. Students watching the annual Dartmouth-Princeton football “Big Game” were interviewed afterwards, and asked to recall details of the game such as total number of punts, fouls, turnovers etc. committed by each side. Students actually reported seeing very different games, depending on which team they supported. Both groups of fans reported their side having played the better (and cleaner) game, and having being the victim of various egregious acts by the other. Over the years, researchers in investigations such as this one have gone to considerable lengths (including, for example, offering cash prizes for most accurate recollections compared to the actual game film) to ensure that fans were giving their most honest recollections of the game. It seems clear that partisanship heavily distorted the way the game was perceived, and the way in which it was later recalled. Indeed, based on the data which was gathered, if one were be tempted to sarcastically ask “are you guys sure that you were watching the same game?”, the answer would clearly have to be an emphatic “No”. It seems singularly appropriate that the term “fan” is derived from the word “fanatic”, defined by the *American Heritage Dictionary* as: “A person marked or motivated by an extreme, unreasoning enthusiasm, as for a cause.”

The *They Saw a Game* study, conducted in the 1950’s, pointed to separate, but interacting phenomena. The first was an unconscious tendency to enhance one’s own side, portraying it as more talented, honest, and morally upright. The second phenomenon was a tendency to vilify the opposition, portraying them as unscrupulous and vile. These two phenomena, i.e. a tendency to enhance one’s own side and to vilify the opposition, has dominated research on intergroup relations for 40 years. In more recent work, the insidious and involuntary nature of these “partisan perceptions” has become more apparent, particularly as they affect the nature of conflict, and the specific ways in which they undermine the negotiation process.

### Partisan Interpretations in Negotiations

*“If there is the slightest hint that the ANC supports this proposal, we will automatically oppose it”* (Spokesperson for the Neo-Nazi White Afrikaner Resistance Movement (AWB), to the BBC, regarding support by the anti-apartheid African National Congress (ANC) for a “day of peace” in South Africa, August 1993).

The tendency to believe that one’s own side is worthy and just, and that the other side is grasping and vile, has far-reaching implications for the negotiator. In addition to obvious dynamics like increased suspicion and mistrust, there are any number of more subtle and insidious problems which are raised. One of the greatest problems which partisan perceptions create in negotiations is a particular form of circular reasoning. If one believes that the other side is evil and immoral, and that their attempts to gain concessions or negotiate terms is merely an attempt to advance their evil and immoral agenda, then any suggestion or concession which the other side makes, is likely to be rejected as not being in good faith or as deliberately deceptive. *Reactive devaluation* refers to just this circular reasoning whereby we react to concessions made by the other side by devaluing them *because* they come from the other side. Thus during the cold war, researchers<sup>2</sup> presented ordinary American voters with two plans (Plan A or Plan B) for international nuclear disarmament, one being attributed to President Reagan and one to Soviet President Gorbachev. Respondents always overwhelmingly endorsed the plan supposedly proposed by Reagan, and rejected the one supposedly proposed by Gorbachev. The rub is that in half the people interviewed, Plan A was attributed to Reagan and Plan B attributed to Gorbachev, while in the other half of the people, the reverse was true. As marketing people like to say, the medium was the message. Regardless of the content of the plans, Americans were ready to endorse a plan supported by their

<sup>1</sup> Hastorf, A. H., & Cantril, H. (1954). They saw a game: A case study. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 49, 129-134.

<sup>2</sup> Ross, L., & Ward, A. (1995), Psychological barriers to dispute resolution. In *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 27. See also Stillinger, C., Epelbaum, M., Keltner, D., & Ross, L. (1991). The reactive devaluation barrier to conflict resolution. *Unpublished manuscript*. Stanford University.

President, and reactively devalued the proposition by Gorbachev, even if it were the same plan voters enthusiastically endorsed when it was supposedly supported by Reagan.

More commonly, this same process can be observed in highly polarized conflicts such as contentious labor negotiations. These are often acrimonious in nature (such as the “Final Offer” case used at Harvard). Lack of trust means that neither side believes the other is operating in good faith, and thus any concessions offered are likely to be automatically devalued, and rejected (such as in the case of the two sides trying to find peace in South Africa, quoted above). Thus, if there are a number of issues on the table, such as salary, benefits, overtime, and job security, and the company decides to offer a concession on one of the issues, the union will often decide that this must be because the company is trying to trick the union into accepting a deal filled with trivial concessions, and that it is the other, still unfulfilled demands, which are really the valuable ones<sup>3</sup>.

Rejected or not, any concession, since it is devalued, does not trigger a reciprocal concession of equal worth, leading to the perception by the first side, that the other is not willing to negotiate fairly. Thus having offered, for example, reduced overtime demands, the union may say to the company, “now, how about some job guarantees”. Sure that this is a trick, the company may well decline (often derisively) to give any further ground in exchange for what is now seen as a worthless offer. In this way, a self-fulfilling prophecy is realized: the other side is not trusted, their behavior is interpreted as suspicious and not in good faith, their attempts at reaching out are responded to defensively and their gestures are devalued, the other side feels slighted and withdraws, and so on. Further, once negotiators learn that their concessions are likely to be devalued, they may chose to withhold them (“why should we offer anything to these people when they just throw it back in our faces?”), leading to added impressions of intransigence and extremism<sup>4</sup>.

### “Naive Realism”

In addition to the tendencies to enhance one’s own side and to denigrate the opposition and their offers and concessions, in recent years an additional phenomenon has been examined in the literature, which involves the ways in which we come to understand the views of the “other side”. This phenomenon derives from the previous two tendencies, but adds greatly to our understanding of the dynamics of conflict and negotiation, particularly in highly polarized situations.

This line of research has lead to the development of a concept known as “naive realism”<sup>5</sup>, which has 3 basic tenets: First, people generally assume they see the world objectively (as the quotation from Ichheiser nicely sums up), underestimating the subjective forces that give rise to their perception and judgment. Second, people tend to assume that others share their judgments and perceptions, a tendency known as the *false consensus effect*.<sup>6</sup> Third, when confronted with disagreement, partisans attribute the differences in judgment and their conflict to their opponent’s ideological bias and irrationality, thereby providing a clear explanation of how others could reach different judgments. The naive realism formulation makes three predictions concerning partisans’ beliefs about their conflict to be examined more closely below: Opposing partisans will a) exaggerate their opposition’s extremism, b) perceive their opposition to be ideologically biased, and c) overestimate the true magnitude of their conflict.

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Robinson, R. J., & Friedman, R. A. (1995). Mistrust and misconstrual in union-management relationships: Causal accounts in adversarial contexts. *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 6, 312-327.

<sup>4</sup> Friedman, R. A., & Robinson, R. J. (1993). Justice for all? Union versus management response to unjust acts and social accounts. *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 4, 99-117. (Also HBS Working Paper 93-014).

<sup>5</sup> Robinson, R. J., Keltner, D., Ward, A., & Ross, L. (1995). Actual versus assumed differences in construal: “Naive realism” in intergroup perception and conflict. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 68, 404-417. (Also HBS Working Paper 94-052).

<sup>6</sup> Ross, L., Greene, D., & House, P. (1977). The false consensus effect: An egocentric bias in social perception and attribution processes. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 13, 279-301.



themselves as “lone moderates” within their conflict<sup>7</sup>. The lone moderate pattern suggests that people tend to dissociate from partisan groups, perceive ideological extremism with some disdain, and assume that they alone are models of rational, principled judgment. This phenomenon is very important in understanding the nature of highly polarized conflicts: as debate becomes more extreme, there is a tendency for “average” people to withdraw and become alienated. The effect is that representatives to negotiations are often far more extreme than the people they represent, and moderate voices cease to be heard.

### Exaggeration of Opponents’ Ideological Bias

In investigating why it is that people believe that others hold the extreme positions described above, the answer invariably resides in a perception of commitment to some radical ideological belief system. Pro-choice and pro-life abortion partisans alike believe that the other side has an agenda that goes well beyond the simple (and central) issue of whether and when women should be able to get abortions. The more extreme partisans on each side (who tend to be the representatives of the various sides) view the issue as merely the tip of the iceberg representing of a set of radical complex social, sexual, political, religious, and economic issues involving women and the nature of society in general. This is not unique to the abortion debate: rather this general set of phenomena—extreme and over-generalized beliefs about the other side, seen as resulting from a radical and dangerous ideological agenda and commitment—characterizes most, if not all of the issues plaguing our society today.

The belief that the other side comprises of ideologues with hidden agendas is a huge impediment to successful negotiation. In one study<sup>8</sup>, researchers asked mildly conservative and liberal students to negotiate a budget which would fund government AIDS projects, including both non-controversial items such as medical research, and more contentious issues like needle-exchange programs and high-school awareness programs. One set of students was paired up with similarly liberal or conservative partners, told they had been partnered with an ideological kindred spirit, and were tasked with splitting the fictitious \$800 between the various programs. Another group of students were not told anything about the ideology of their partners, and given the same task. A third group was also paired with someone of similar ideological orientation, but were misled into believing that the other was of a slightly opposing ideological orientation. The first two groups, operating without the handicap of perceived ideological differences, swiftly reached agreement on sensible and balanced budgets. In the third group, however, where people apparently believed that the other person was a wild-eyed ideologue, things were very different. Despite the fact that the briefing had only fleetingly mentioned “mild ideological differences”, negotiations became protracted, embittered affairs, resulting in limited agreements and often failed to produce a budget at all. Thus merely the *perception* of ideological difference, devoid of any reality whatsoever, can prove to be an almost insurmountable obstacle to negotiation. When there are real and substantial actual ideological differences, their exaggeration can utterly destroy any hope of negotiated agreement (the budget crisis of 1995/1996 in Washington seems more understandable in the light of this work).

### Exaggerated Perceptions of Substantive Differences

The two previous phenomena—beliefs that the other side consists of extreme, ideological biased zealots—contributes to the final, and, from the negotiator’s point of view, most important aspect of naive realism: the *exaggeration of actual differences* between the two sides in terms of concrete issues under dispute.

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<sup>7</sup> Keltner, D., & Robinson, R. J. (1995). Extremism, power and the imagined basis of social conflict. Harvard Business School: Boston, MA. (HBS Working Paper 96-021). See also Robinson, R. J., & Keltner, D. (1996, in preparation). *Lone moderates in ideological disputes*. Unpublished manuscript, Harvard University.

<sup>8</sup> Keltner, D., & Robinson, R. J. (1993). Imagined ideological differences in conflict escalation and resolution. *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 4, 249-262. (Also HBS Working Paper 93-055).

Studies referred to above have shown that opposing partisans imagine polarized conflicts that at best only modestly resembled their actual differences with their opposition. However, much of the work described thus far has been about *attitude*, rather than *action*. The question of most interest to those actually involved in trying to negotiate their way out of conflict remains: What does the other side really *want*, and what would they *do* if given the chance to implement their policies?

In the most extreme cases of social debate—racial conflict, the Arab-Israeli conflict, apartheid in South Africa—both sides commonly believe that the other side’s objective is nothing less than total victory and the destruction of them, their enemies. But is this so? Is the objective of anti-death penalty advocates, as death-penalty often suggest, to give murderers a slap on the wrist and put them back on the street? Does the PLO, as right-wing Israeli political groups argue, secretly plot the complete destruction of Israel? Do “revisionist” educational advocates want, as more “traditionalist” scholars suggest, to replace the works of Shakespeare with Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*?

This last question is one which was recently investigated<sup>9</sup>. The content of educational syllabi has become one of the most contentious and polarized debates on campuses around the USA in recent years, exhibiting all of the phenomena discussed thus far: extreme and negative perceptions of the other side, attributions of radical ideological bias, and a basic belief that it is absolutely pointless to negotiate with the nuts on the other side<sup>10</sup>.

Often lost in the acrimony is a basic question: what is it that both sides actually want to see taught to university students? When rank-and-file members of each side were given the opportunity to describe their preferences, many surprising findings emerged. When given the task of independently constructing their ideal syllabus, the two sides showed a surprising amount of overlap and agreement as to the educational value of various works (including, as it turned out, a similar adoration of Shakespeare). This was in marked contrast to the syllabus each side thought the other would select: those imagined syllabi were extreme caricatures of the balanced and reasonable lists each side had actually come up with. A consistent finding from this line of work, across a range of disputes, has been the discovery that whatever the actual differences between the sides, these are dwarfed by the magnitude of perceived differences, and that much agreement actually exists in practice, but this is almost never realized by competing partisans.

### **Contributing Mechanisms and Possible Solutions: The Oversimplification and Polarization of Social Debate**

In any era of American life, it would be true to say that social debates have often been acrimonious and even violent. Thus while current arguments over things like abortion rights, gays in the military, and even the O.J. Simpson trial, bear witness to the sorts of polarization discussed in this piece, it may well be that they are not remarkable, as debates go, in the long sweep of history in this country. However, while social historians might offer similar examples from the past—slavery, prohibition, the Vietnam War—it is without doubt true that there are contemporary forces at work which have changed the way in which debates are played out.

### **The Mass Media and Partisan Perception**

The most obvious example of the changed context of social debates has been first the invention, and then the proliferation of information-technology which allows virtually every household in the country to witness (or every household to “virtually” witness) these debates, as represented by

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<sup>9</sup> Robinson, R. J., & Keltner, D. (January 1996, in press). Much ado about nothing? Revisionists and Traditionalists choose and introductory English syllabus. *Psychological Science*. See also: Keltner, D., & Robinson, R. J. (1996). Defending the status quo: A source of misperception in the social conflict. Harvard Business School: Boston, MA. (*HBS Working Paper 96-027*).

<sup>10</sup> See for example, D’Souza, D. (1991). *Illiberal education: The politics of race and sex on campus*. New York: Vintage Books; Bloom, A. (1987). *The closing of the American mind*; and Hunter, J. D. (1991). *Culture wars: The struggle to define America*. New York: Basic Books.

spokespersons to the various sides, on radio, television, cable, and even the internet. Beyond mere reporting, an explosion of “talk-shows” on radio and television, from every angle on the ideological chart, has meant that almost any group can get itself into the public eye. Remarkably, the effect of this unprecedented exchange of free ideas, in the opinion of many commentators<sup>11</sup> has not been to facilitate consensus, but rather to more deeply divide the nation. Rather than resulting in elegant and informed debate, a certain inarticulate rage surrounds many of these disputes, with people apparently “pre-offended” on given issues<sup>12</sup>, unable to confront ideas which disagree with their own without giving in to the twin non-productive strategies of silence or rage.

It would be all too easy to blame ratings-minded television executives for increased polarization and loss of social consensus. Indeed, any politician in need of a boost to sagging poll figures can safely attack the “media culture” for encouraging promiscuity, drug use, violence, secularism, homosexuality, and the breakdown of the family. However, there is a less extreme, more subtle point here. To take talk-shows as an example, the media largely reflects popular debate in the programming it offers. However, what the media is guilty of, is in failing to correct for naive tendencies, described in this paper, which feed into the sort of polarization, and mistaken perceptions, we have discussed. Thus by selecting extreme and controversial (even within their own side) spokespersons for a public debate, the perception is encouraged that the two sides are extremely far apart, that no common ground exists or is possible, and the other side is grossly unreasonable. In view of such an analysis, it is only sensible for individuals to suspend true debate, to wall themselves off from this insane alternative perspective, and to do everything they can to defeat such an agenda at every turn. Perhaps even more insidious, the average viewer is likely to find little in common with either side, and thus feel further alienated from what is portrayed as being the only two perspectives on this particular issue.

The other, salient way in which the media falls into the extremism trap is in failing to provide context for debates. Thus in a talk-show confrontation between child-sex advocates and church officials, or between Holocaust skeptics and survivors, or between creationists and evolution theorists, little if any reference is ever given to the broader support the two sides enjoy in the larger society, or to the credibility of the individuals in the studio. Instead, once gain, the impression is given that both sides are equally respected, and equally representative, of the views and science of society in general. This feeds both polarization, and a sort of “50/50” mind-set, whereby even partisans to the dispute may believe that about half of the relevant population falls on either side of the ideological divide.

## Who Speaks: The Issue of Representatives

*“People think that when you negotiate, that you are trying to convince the other side; whereas in fact, when you negotiate, you are trying to convince your own side”* (Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, on CNN, about the Palestinian-Israeli proposals for Palestinian autonomy, August 1993).

It is beyond the scope of this article to examine in depth the process whereby the representatives of various positions come to be elected, selected, and appointed. However, what is clear is that many difficult disputes are made more troubled by the fact that extremists become the spokespersons for the various sides. This is caused by factors such as people wanting to know that the person negotiating with “the enemy” does not give too much away, so they elect someone who is unlikely to make the concessions necessary to reach agreement. Secondly, as the quote above indicates, when a representative is chosen who is willing to deal with the other side, they run the risk of being perceived by hard-liners on their own side as too soft, or even treasonous. Basically, it is difficult for someone who thinks the other side sort of, maybe, has a point, to get selected as the person who gets to speak for one side when the other, thanks to the sorts of phenomena described above, is seen as comprising of extremist ideologues.

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Hentoff, N. (1992). *Free speech for me—but not for thee*. New York: Harper Collins; and Hughes, R. (1993). *Culture of complaint: The fraying of America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>12</sup> Robinson, R. J. (1995). The conflict competent organization: A research agenda for emerging organizational challenges. In R. Kramer & D. Messick (Eds.) *Negotiation in its social context*. (pp. 186-204). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

## Overcoming Partisan Perceptions

While ideologues hammer away at each from entrenched positions, it is possible that the less extreme, more reasonable person we all believe we are, may find that others are also less extreme, and more reasonable. However, for this to happen, it will require a new grass-roots involvement in both political life (e.g. voting and local government), as well as actual discussion with those of different opinion, rather than simply having paid guns do it for us on television. The question, simply put, is not what those folk on television think, or even what the extreme version of each position is. The key to resolution may well lie in the simple query: “what do most people think?”.

While many of the examples discussed in this paper may be seen as extreme and unusual examples of entrenched conflicts, they should be understood to represent a general tendency in most conflicts to paint the other side as extreme, unreasonable, and untrustworthy. The implications for the negotiator are gloomy and solutions not necessarily apparent. However, there are a number of things which can be done to work around the tendency toward partisan perceptions, just as there are things that can be done to avoid partisan perceptions.

The first class of solutions involves self-awareness on the part of the negotiator. It is not enough to merely be aware that we are prone to partisan perception, we must also realize that our opponent sees *us* as extreme, unreasonable, and devious. Thus the onus is on us to make ourselves trustworthy, and to dispel the impressions of others. This may involve making the first gesture, being prepared to offer goodwill gestures, and inviting input from the other side on how they would like the negotiation to proceed.

To avoid reactive devaluation, it is again necessary to manage one’s own psychology, and that of the other side. Before the negotiation begins, you should have a clear valuation of the issues you would like from the deal, and how you value things you might be asked to give up. If the other side offers something, you should then stick to your valuation of that item, and not devalue it because the other side was willing to give it up. Similarly—notwithstanding that negotiators may often seek to disguise their true priorities, often mistakenly thinking that this affords them some tactical advantage in negotiation—insist that others give their priorities before beginning negotiation. Once established, press for commitment to those priorities (e.g. “now, you say that you really want to go to a 5-year financing plan. Are you sure that is your top priority? I am willing to try and get that from our investors, but only if you are sure that is something that means a lot to you”). By reinforcing the impression that this *is* a valuable concession, it is possible to avoid reactive devaluation. Sharing your priorities as much as seems possible with the other side can also help to build trust (complete sharing is often not possible, but we can generally do better than is typically the practice).

The more general problem, that each side sees the other as extreme and unreasonable, is a thorny one indeed. If such beliefs seem likely, it is imperative that the two sides spend time dispelling non-productive stereotypes and simplifications. This process has two aspects: finding out about the “real” views of the other side, and teaching them about your own position. By now it should be clear that we cannot just assume that the other side understands what decent and reasonable people we are. Taking the time to lay out both positions is thus often a first step. More useful, however, is a technique with many names (often referred to as “mirroring”) which involves each side trying to articulate, in writing, what they understand the position of the other to be. This invites the exposing of mistaken beliefs, and offers opportunities to correct mistaken impressions. What is important here is that the two sides can have an honest (and often cathartic) conversation, before negotiation begins, without giving away anything they do not want to, and can go into the actual bargaining with a more realistic understanding of one another.

If all else fails, it is possible to bring in a third party, who is not part of the partisan perception dynamic. Although neutral parties, as described in the biased assimilation note, run the risk of being perceived by both sides as biased in favor of the other, experienced mediators and arbitrators can usually navigate around such potential minefields. These “alternative dispute resolution” (ADR) experts can offer a variety of potential techniques which make it possible to get away from imagined, exaggerated differences, and which focus on the crucial issues of actual agreement and actual disagreement.



It is a difficult lesson to learn to be open to the possibility that the other side may not be as extreme as we thought they were. It is even harder to remember that “they” probably see *us* as equally unreasonable and extreme. Real differences in positions and interests are tricky enough to deal with: unless we learn to avoid reacting to the inflated phantoms of imagined differences, we will fail to resolve many of the more difficult problems in our lives, both personally, and as a society at large.