

36. Understanding Misunderstanding: Social Psychological Perspectives

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Researchers in many subdisciplines of psychology have made their reputations cleverly documenting the various cognitive, perceptual, and motivational biases that systematically distort human judgment and inference. In this chapter, we explore some of the interpersonal and intergroup *consequences* of such biases. In particular, we consider the role these biases can play in creating, exacerbating, and perpetuating conflict between individuals and between groups.

One way in which biases contribute to conflict is obvious. When different people are subject to the influence of different biases, they are bound to think and feel differently about issues. And people who disagree with each other – indeed, even people who are reasonably like minded but attach different priorities to the problems they feel should be addressed or the actions they feel should be taken – are apt to frustrate each other’s efforts and ambitions. There is, however, a second way in which biases fuel enmity that is less direct, but not less important. People and groups who disagree about matters of mutual concern not only interact in conflictual ways; they also *interpret*, and frequently *misinterpret*, each other’s words and deeds. The nature of such misattributions, and their consequences, occupies most of our attention in this chapter. First, however, we begin by simply noting some well-studied cognitive and motivational biases and illustrating how they might foster interpersonal and intergroup enmity.

FROM INTRAPERSONAL BIASES TO INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT

Attention, Perception, and Assimilation Biases

Following Bruner (1957), legions of researchers have demonstrated that, in disambiguating stimuli, people “go beyond the information given.” They perceive things as they have been led by experience or suggestion to expect them to be, and their perceptions are further biased by their hopes, fears, needs, and immediate emotional state. Investigators concerned with attitude change similarly challenged simple learning theory formulations by arguing that the recipients of persuasive arguments often prove to be *rationalizing* rather than *rational* animals, and as such are influenced less by logical rigor or objective evidence than by the interests and preconceptions that they bring to their task (see Katz, 1960).

Disagreements and misunderstandings about capital punishment, abortion policy, how to achieve peace in the Middle East, or the wisdom of trying a deposed political leader for war crimes, thus become inevitable. Even when (indeed, *especially* when) people earnestly attend to the facts and arguments offered by those on the "other side," their opinions become even more polarized. This "polarization" reflects the tendency for partisans to accept at face value arguments and evidence congruent with their interests and beliefs, while critically scrutinizing arguments and evidence that threaten those interests and beliefs (see Edwards & Smith, 1996; Ross & Lepper, 1980). Moreover, we suggest, such biased processing of information fosters harsh evaluations of individuals on the other side whose perceptions and arguments, in the eyes of the opposing partisan, appear biased and self-serving.

Intergroup enmity can also arise from simple availability and representativeness biases (Kahneman & Tversky, 1973; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974) – biases with which readers of this book are likely to be quite familiar. Once again, illustrative examples are commonplace. Estimates of the severity of social ills like poverty, unemployment, or discrimination are bound to be influenced by availability biases reflecting where one lives, whom one talks to, and what one reads. Our media-based notions of what a "representative" INS agent, follower of Islam, Texan, lesbian, or homophobe *looks* and *acts* like influence our expectations, and thus help determine which claims about particular group members we find credible or noncredible. They also determine whether accounts about individual deeds by group members are treated as stereotypical or dismissed as unrevealing aberrations. The present thesis is that blindness about the role that such biases play in shaping our own political views, and a penchant for seeing self-serving or ideologically determined biases in other's views, exacerbates group conflict.

Dissonance Reduction and Reactance

The dissonance researchers (Festinger, 1957; see also Aronson, 1969; Brehm & Cohen, 1962) showed unparalleled ingenuity in demonstrating the ways in which people rationalize their actions and reduce discrepancies in their belief systems. These social psychologists were not the first, of course, to appreciate the human capacity for rationalization. Students of the psychoanalytic tradition, and other canny observers who have noted correlations between political beliefs and individual or group interests, long ago recognized that capacity. What dissonance research highlighted that is relevant to the concerns of this chapter is the barriers to rational judgment and dispute resolution that are created by prior commitment, personal sacrifice, and perseverance in the face of earlier temptations to abandon a cause. Thus, Vietnam War veterans who were injured or held in POW camps and draft resisters who left the country or went to jail for their actions must either continue to disagree about the events of 30 years ago, and about the nature of patriotism and the appropriate limits of political dissent, or else pay a heavy psychic price. Our further contention

is that such practitioners of dissonance reduction and rationalization are apt to make unwarranted inferences about each other's objectivity and honesty in facing the past and drawing lessons for the future – and to feel wronged and misunderstood by the rest of us who seem content to “move on” and adopt a more conciliatory view.

The veterans, moreover, are apt to think draft evaders were cowards and traitors who even today are unwilling or unable to face that “truth” about themselves. The draft evaders, conversely, are apt to believe that it is the veterans who persist in their delusions because they cannot bear the pain of “facing reality” by recognizing that their personal sacrifices, and the even greater sacrifices of their fallen comrades, were pointless. Both groups agree only that the rest of us have too readily forgotten that unhappy chapter in American history. This characterization of Vietnam veterans and draft resisters, like our previous characterizations of opposing partisans, anticipates another of the main points that we explicate and begin to document in this chapter. We argue that people readily recognize biases in others that they do not recognize in themselves, and as a result, they make overly negative attributions about others whose views and self-interested motives seem “conveniently” congruent.

Although less well known, and perhaps less intuitive, than dissonance reduction, the process of *psychological reactance* (Brehm, 1966; Brehm & Brehm, 1981; Wicklund, 1974) also belongs on our list of biases that create barriers to dispute resolution. Of particular relevance is the phenomenon we call *reactive devaluation*, whereby potential compromise offers or concessions become less attractive to the recipient as a consequence of the fact that they have been offered. In one study (Maaz, Ward, Katz, & Ross, 2000), Arab and Israeli university students evaluated peace proposals actually offered by the two sides in the latest round of Middle East negotiations. The participants all read exactly the same proposals, which were necessarily vague about exactly what kind of Palestinian state would emerge after the negotiation process was complete. What varied was purported *authorship*; that is, some respondents were told that the proposal under examination had been offered by the Israelis whereas others were told that it had been offered by the Palestinians. The results were dramatic. Purported authorship mattered more than the actual authorship and content of the proposal, so that when the proposals' purported authorships were reversed, partisans preferred the other side's proposal to their own.

In earlier studies of the relevant phenomenon (see Ross, 1995; Ross & Stillinger, 1991; Ross & Ward, 1995, 1996), the investigators manipulated not the authorship but the status (i.e., “on the table” versus “merely hypothetical” or “not yet offered”) of proposals to end a conflict or disagreement. The result was a consistent one. Proposed concessions that seemed relatively attractive before they had been offered became significantly less attractive once put on the table. The attributional consequences that ensue from such devaluation are familiar, and unfortunate. The party receiving the proposal responds coolly, complaining

that the proposed terms offer too little or came too late – a response that induces distrust and denunciation from the party offering it, thus further heightening the cycle of ill-will and intransigence.

Lessons from Prospect Theory

Prospect theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979, 1984) deals with normatively suspect decisions and preference orderings that arise from the way people deal with potential gains versus losses. Its predictions are highly relevant to interpersonal and intergroup negotiation because changes in the status quo that represent a prospective gain to one side may represent a prospective loss to the other side. Furthermore, because “losses loom larger than gains,” parties should be reluctant to make agreements that require them to accept losses in order to achieve gains – especially under circumstances where the relevant losses are perceived as certain while the relevant gains are subject to uncertainty.

To our knowledge, no empirical research has examined *loss aversion* and *unwillingness to trade* (Kahneman, Knetsch, & Thaler, 1991) in the context of conflict and negotiation, but the unhappy scenario suggested by prospect theory is a familiar one to observers of interethnic or international conflict. In the Middle East, Northern Ireland, and other troubled parts of the world, longstanding adversaries remain deadlocked in a “hurting stalemate” (Pruitt, Rubin, & Kim, 1994), unwilling to risk a change in the status quo that seemingly would be mutually beneficial. In so doing, they fail to recognize that inaction, far from being a neutral or safe option, incurs not only the costs of deadlock, but also the risk of future deterioration in the situation. Perhaps even more importantly, the parties forfeit potential joint gains that could result from real peace and a truly cooperative relationship.

Although this scenario has not been explored in the laboratory, a study of actual tort case outcomes (Rachlinski, 1994) demonstrates that prospect theory axioms and utility functions can indeed be applied to consequential decisions made by sophisticated individuals engaged in conflict. The study revealed that plaintiffs, who face the prospect of gain – and thus should prefer certain outcomes that guarantee gain – proved to be “risk averse” (i.e., “settled” in cases in which their expected financial outcome would have been better if they had accepted the risks of trial). By contrast, defendants proved to be “loss averse” in that they opted to accept the risks of trial rather than accept a certain loss even when their expected outcome would have been better if they had agreed to the other side’s pretrial settlement offer.

Our contention again is twofold. First, we argue that reluctance to trade concessions, coupled with a willingness to take foolish risks in order to avoid certain losses and refusal to take sensible risks in order to achieve prospective gains, operate not only in the courtroom, but also in labor negotiations, trade disputes, and territorial and self-determination conflicts that rage throughout the world. Second, we argue that the adversaries in question are inclined to

defend their own "prudence" even while making harsh attributions about their adversaries' "intransigence."

Biases in Attributions Made about Self and Others

Two much-researched attributional biases directly affect interpersonal misunderstanding and enmity. The first bias involves people's tendency to underestimate the impact of situational or contextual factors on overt action, and as a result to make overly broad and overly "dispositional" attributions about other actors (see Ross, 1977; Ross & Nisbett, 1991; also Jones, 1979, 1990). The second bias involves the tendency for people to give greater weight to situational factors in assessing their own actions and outcomes than those of their peers (Jones & Nisbett, 1971; see also Gilbert & Malone, 1995). These attributional biases, we argue, leave the "losers" in the various struggles of our contemporary world (e.g., the homeless, workers victimized by the global economy, members of stigmatized minorities, and parties to ethnic strife) feeling doubly victimized. They feel victimized not only by the objective privations of their situations, but also by the assessments and suggested remedies offered by their victimizers and others who "do not understand the real situation." Furthermore, their own accounts of their travails and their proposals for redress are apt to provoke highly negative responses from those whose assistance they seek. These observers are apt to complain about the victims' "refusal to accept any responsibility for their circumstances" and "unwillingness to do anything to help themselves," and a downward cycle of misattribution and mistrust is likely to ensue that further compromises opportunities for collaborative problem solving.

Conflict can be exacerbated not only by misattributions about others, but also by biased assessments about the self. Consider the "better-than-average" effect (Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbacker, Yurak, & Vredenberg, 1995; Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989; Kruger & Dunning, 1999), whereby the majority of people believe that their abilities, performances, or attributes exceed those of the "typical" individual. Similarly, consider the tendency for actors to overestimate their own contributions to joint products (Ross & Sicoly, 1979). Such biases may be adaptive in fostering increased effort, enhancing self-efficacy, creating self-fulfilling prophecies of success (see Bandura, 1977; Dweck, 1986), and perhaps even in fostering mental and physical health (Taylor & Brown, 1988). Yet the same biases are apt to leave people feeling overworked, underappreciated, and undercompensated relative to the other parties with whom they transact their affairs. In any negotiations involving allocation of rewards, resources, and opportunities, individuals or groups showing such self-enhancement biases are likely to feel they have been denied outcomes commensurate with their entitlements and further denied the gratitude and recognition they deserve for their past forbearance.

In the two sections that follow, we pursue the discussion of attributional biases and perceptions of bias in self versus others in more detail. In so doing, we attempt to present a general conceptual framework that hinges on an account

of "naive realism," and to offer some speculations and research results that build upon on this framework.

NAIVE REALISM: BIASED PERCEPTIONS AND PERCEPTIONS OF BIAS

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 ways. (Ichheiser, 1949, p. 39)

As Ichheiser suggested more than half a century ago, people are often aware that others do not share their view of the world and they are willing to account for the relevant disparity in viewpoints by citing particular biases. Indeed, in interpreting and predicting the behavior of their peers, people may be inclined to *overestimate* the impact of many of the shortcomings and biases that we reviewed in the opening section. The real source of misunderstanding and enmity arises from people's failure to recognize the operation of such biases in their *own* judgments and decisions. People, we argue, are inclined to hold the misguided conviction that they somehow see the world, and evaluate divisive issues, in a uniquely clear, unbiased, and "unmediated" fashion.

In this section, we introduce the more general issue of egocentrism and related failures in perspective taking. We begin by describing the well-documented "false consensus" effect, and reporting three simple demonstration experiments that highlight the particular difficulty that individuals face in separating their own experience of stimulus events from the nature of the events themselves. We then offer a more general account of "lay epistemology" that can lead people to make invidious distinctions in assessing their own objectivity relative to that of their adversaries or even their peers. We conclude by exploring implications of the layperson's epistemological bias for interpersonal and intergroup conflict.

Egocentrism and Other Failures in Perspective Taking

Piaget described the stages by which the child conquers his or her egocentrism and comes to recognize that different actors can have different perspectives on the same object or event (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958; Piaget, 1926, 1928; see also Flavell, 1963, 1985). As Piaget noted, all people of normal intelligence not only learn to recognize the existence of differences in perspectives, they even gain some skill at anticipating specific sources of perceptual, cognitive, or motivational bias. What most psychologists fail to emphasize in discussing Piaget's account of social development, however, is that this process never reaches fruition. Although some aspects of children's egocentrism disappear through maturation and experience, adults continue to show important

limitations in perspective taking. Let us begin by exploring some of these limitations.

The False Consensus Effect

One manifestation of adult egocentrism has been termed the *false consensus effect* (Ross, Greene, & House, 1977). This effect involves an overestimation of the commonness of one's own responses and reactions. More specifically, it involves the tendency for people who make a given choice or hold a given conviction to see that response as more common and less revealing of personal attributes than do people who make the opposite response. In a particularly memorable false consensus demonstration by Ross, Greene, and House, students (participating in a study ostensibly concerned with the impact of "unusual media") were asked if they would be willing to walk around campus wearing a sandwich-board sign bearing a simple message (e.g., "Eat at Joe's"). The participants were also told that, if they preferred, they could simply opt to return on another day for a different study.

As anticipated, both those who agreed to wear the sign and those who declined thought that their response would be the more common, and less revealing, choice. In interpreting this result, Ross et al. anticipated a central thesis of the present chapter by suggesting that the participants' divergent estimates and inferences resulted from their differing *construals* of the situation they faced. Thus, to the extent that participants imagined that they and other potential sign-wearers would meet expressions of interest from peers and (when they explained their costume) admiration for their willingness to be a good sport, they agreed to don the sign and expected that only "uptight people with no sense of humor" would decline. Conversely, to the extent that they imagined that sign-wearers would face contemptuous snickers (and be given no opportunity to explain their task), they expected that only fools, showoffs, or patsies would comply.

A set of studies by Gilovich (1990) provided evidence for this "construal interpretation" of false consensus. First, he demonstrated that the items providing the strongest evidence for false consensus in an extensive questionnaire used by Ross et al. were precisely those items that allowed the most room for personal interpretation regarding the relevant choices. Gilovich then offered more direct evidence for the proposed mechanism. In one study, for example, he asked participants first whether they preferred music from the 1960s or the 1980s, and then what percentage of their peers would share that preference. The predicted false consensus effect was obtained. More importantly, further analysis revealed that the group preferring 1960s music and the group preferring 1980s music had generated different exemplars of the two musical eras – exemplars whose differing merits were recognized readily by subsequent raters. Participants expressing a preference for 1960s music generated a more agreeable sample of 1960 performers and tunes, and those expressing a preference for 1980s music generated a more agreeable sample of 1980s performers and tunes. In other words, the two groups construed the respective objects

of judgment quite differently, and then failed to recognize or make adequate allowance for this construal difference in estimating the preferences of their peers.

“Childish” Games

A special and extreme case of false consensus occurs when we try to communicate information that is familiar and meaningful to us, but not to the individual whom we are trying to enlighten. A famous *New Yorker* cartoon on the subject presents an initial “bubble” in which we see the clear and orderly cognitive map of a man giving well-rehearsed directions to a fellow motorist, followed by a second bubble in which we see the vague and confused map of the man who is hearing those directions. Although the cartoon does not complicate matters by offering a third bubble showing us how the direction-giver imagines that his map has been received, the implication is clear; that is, the direction-giver fails to appreciate the difficulty of the relevant decoding task and the resulting difference between the two maps. As a result, he leaves the encounter overly optimistic about the fate of the motorist whom he has tried to enlighten. Three studies conducted in our laboratory illustrate how difficult it can be to appreciate the perspective of a peer who is facing a task or problem, especially when our own “privileged” vantage point dominates our experience of the interchange.

Encoding and Decoding “Musical” Tapping. Dissertation research by Elizabeth Newton (1990) in our laboratory showed how difficult it can be to separate one’s own “privileged” experience of a stimulus from the features of that stimulus that are available to other perceivers. Participants in the study were assigned to one of two roles: “tappers” or “listeners.” Each tapper was given a list of 25 well-known songs ranging from “America the Beautiful” to “Rock Around the Clock,” and asked to choose a song whose rhythm they then tapped out to a listener. The tapper was then asked to assess the likelihood that his or her particular listener would successfully identify the title of the song, and also to estimate the proportion of students who would be able to do so when given the same listening opportunity. Listeners tried first to identify the tune, and then to estimate the proportion of their peers who would succeed or fail at the same task.

Before considering Newton’s results, let us contrast the subjective experiences of the two types of participants. Imagine yourself first as the tapper. As you rhythmically tap out the tune you have chosen, you inevitably “hear” the melody and even the words of the song. Indeed, many of Newton’s tappers reported hearing the full orchestration, complete with rich harmonies between strings, winds, brass, and human voice. Now imagine yourself as the listener. For you, there are no notes, words, chords, or instruments – only a series of monotone taps. You cannot even tell whether the brief, irregular periods of silence between taps should be construed as sustained notes or musical rests between notes. This difference in perspectives and in experiences is easy to

stipulate. The question posed by the study involves the capacity of the tappers to distinguish their private embellishments from the impoverished stimuli they were presenting to their listeners – or their ability to make adequate allowances for the relevant differences in perspective and experience when called upon to estimate their listeners' success.

Newton's results provided clear evidence for the "inadequate allowance" thesis. Tappers' predictions of listener success ranged from 10 to 95%, with an average of 50%. Listeners, by contrast, correctly identified only three tunes in the entire study – a success rate of less than 3%! In a separate study, Morris, Heath, and Jost (1999) replicated the Newton result and explored the interpersonal attributions made by the tappers. In particular, the investigators showed that tappers attributed the listeners' failures to inattentiveness or lack of effort rather than to the objective difficulty of their task.

Such results prompt us to begin considering other instances in everyday life in which analogous failures in perspective taking occur and contribute to misattributions and inappropriately harsh interpersonal inferences. Consider, for example, a teacher's attempt to set aside her own knowledge and mastery of the material she is teaching in order to appreciate the perspective of a student being exposed to the information and ideas for the first time. All too often, we suspect, the result is a student who sees the teacher as unclear and impatient and perhaps also a teacher who sees the student as inattentive, unmotivated, or even stupid (see Hinds, 1999; also related research by Keysar, 1994; Keysar, Ginzel, & Bazerman, 1995.)

Figuring Out "My World." A second demonstration (Puccio & Ross, 1999), designed with the results of Newton's musical tapping study very much in mind, dealt again with a situation in which people who know the message or intent behind a series of "clues" make guesses about the insights gleaned by the recipients of those clues. In this study, the experimenter introduced participants to the following problem:

I'm going to tell you about "My World," and about some of the things that are and are not a part of my world, some of the things that people in my world do and do not do, and some of the things that they like and dislike. There is one characteristic or principle that unifies all of the things that are part of, or that are done and liked, in my world – a principle that distinguishes them from the things that are not part of it or are not done or liked there.

The experimenter then proceeded to offer verbally a series of 25 clues, each consisting of a statement such as, "In my world, there are *trees* and *grass*, but not *flowers*," or "In my world, people like *swimming* and *racquetball*, but not *snowboarding* and *skating*." After each set of five clues, the participants were asked if they had figured out the operative rule and also to estimate what percentage of the people in the room facing the same task had figured it out.

Prior to administering the instructions and clues, the experimenter assigned participants either to the role of "solvers," who undertook the task described,

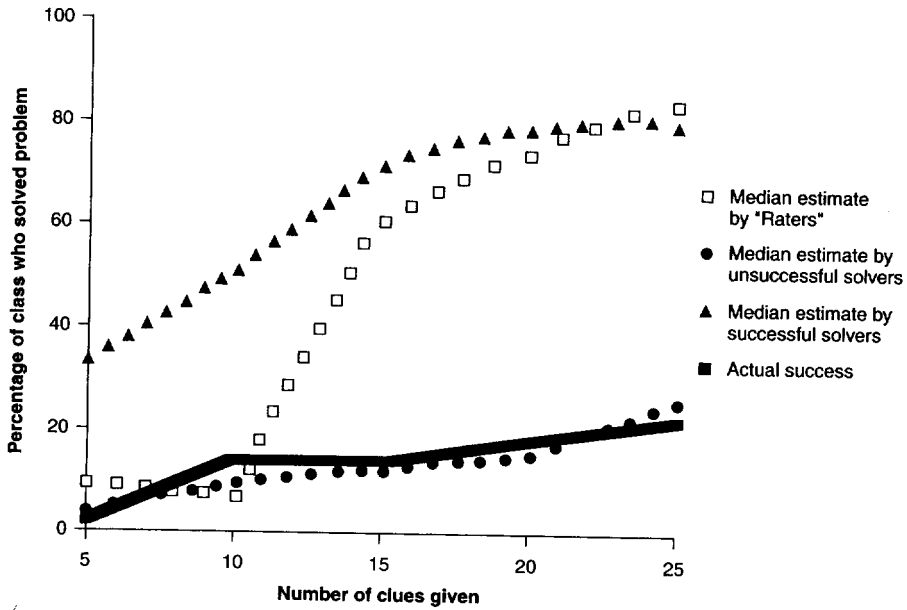


Figure 36.1. Actual versus estimated success in the "My World" problem.

or to that of "raters." In contrast to solvers, raters were preinformed of the solution, which was that only objects or activities that contained *double letters* belonged in "My World." Like the solvers, the raters were asked after each set of five clues to estimate the proportion of the class who had solved the problem at that point in the proceedings. Raters were also asked to indicate the point at which they thought they personally would have solved it, had they not been preinformed. The question of concern to us, of course, was whether in making these estimates the raters would be able to separate their own knowledge and subjective experience as they offered the clues from the information they actually were providing to the aspiring problem solvers.

Our results provided clear support for the inadequate allowance thesis (see Fig. 36.1). Although only 21% of the class solved the problem on the basis of the 25 clues provided, the raters' median estimate was close to 83%. Moreover, every single rater said that there was at least a 50% chance or better that they personally would have solved it, and 42% said that they were *certain* that they would have done so. It is further interesting to note that successful solvers estimated a success rate of 78% for their peers – that is, a percentage almost as high as the 83% figure estimated by raters who had been told the solution in advance. By contrast, participants who failed to find the solution were quite accurate in their predictions; they estimated that only 25% of their peers would succeed where they personally had failed.

As in the musical tapping study, what we observe is a particularly strong version of the false consensus effect. Once one knows the message being conveyed

by the clue giver, that message (regardless of whether one initially discerned it for oneself) appears very obvious. Moreover, one loses the ability to appreciate the perspective of someone who does not know it. The double letters in each clue seem to “jump out,” and it is nearly impossible to imagine them not doing so. The “obviousness” of the clues, of course, is far from apparent to the naive problem solver, who is entertaining countless possible theories (many of which prove to be dead-end conjectures about the nature of the objects and activities connoted by the words rather than the nature of the words themselves). Reminiscent of the subjects in Morris et al.’s (1999) follow-up to the musical tapping study, the raters in our study typically thought that peers who did not solve the problem were likely to be “bad at word games, puzzles, riddles, etc.” Again, a failure to appreciate the impact of the relevant difference in perspectives led participants to make unwarranted negative inferences about their peers.

Two Views of Romantic “Break-Ups.” Asymmetry in assessing the obviousness of a message can make its influence felt with particular poignancy in the context of intimate relationships – especially ones that have deteriorated. In a simple study of this phenomenon, Pronin and Ross (1999) explored the perceptions of young men and women reflecting on the most recent case in which they had ended a relationship with someone else, and the most recent case in which it was the other person who had ended the relationship. What participants rated, in a suitably counterbalanced research design, was the clarity of the communications that occurred in both instances. As predicted, our participants perceived their own efforts in initiating the break-up as significantly clearer, and less characterized by “mixed signals,” than the efforts of the person who initiated the break-up with them. Furthermore, the specific words participants recalled having spoken when they initiated the break-up were less ambiguous (according to neutral raters) than the words they recalled their partner having spoken in breaking-up with them.

The participants in our break-up study thus appeared to have some difficulty in separating what that they thought they had said, or perhaps what they felt and had intended to convey, from that which they had actually communicated to the other party. Borrowing a metaphor from the tapping study, we might say that in initiating break-ups, participants were frustrated by their ex-partner’s inability or unwillingness to “hear the music,” but resentful of their partner’s failure in musicianship when they were the ones “facing the music.”

Tenets of Naive Realism

The limitations in perspective taking that we have been discussing reflect a kind of worldview or lay epistemology that can appropriately be termed *naive realism*. That is, people persist in feeling that their own take on the world enjoys particular authenticity, and that other actors will, or at least should, share that take, if they are attentive, rational, and objective perceivers of reality and open-minded seekers of truth. It is not that people are unaware that their own views

have been shaped by their own, perhaps atypical, experiences. On the contrary, there clearly are cases in which we recognize that our views and priorities reflect our unique status or our unique experiences. Yet in such cases, we are inclined to feel that our particular vantage point (e.g., that of a devout Christian, the child of an alcoholic, a volunteer at the local battered women's shelter, or the CEO of a Fortune 500 company) has been particularly *enlightening*. By contrast, we see others' unique status or unique experiences as a source of inevitable and understandable biases that distort their objectivity and lead them to unwise or unreasonable positions on the relevant issues.

This epistemological stance can be summarized in the form of the following three specific propositions or tenets (Ross & Ward, 1996) that, for ease of exposition, we express in first-person terms:

1. I see stimuli, issues, and events as they are in objective reality, and my social attitudes, beliefs, preferences, priorities, and the like follow from a relatively dispassionate (indeed, unmediated) apprehension of the information or evidence at hand.
2. Other rational social perceivers generally share my judgments and reactions – provided that they have had access to the same information that gave rise to my views, and provided that they too have processed that information in a reasonably thoughtful and open-minded fashion.
3. The failure of a given individual or group to share my judgments and reactions arises from one of three possible sources: (1) the individual or group in question may have been exposed to a different sample of information than I was (in which case, provided that the other party is reasonable and open-minded, the sharing or pooling of information will lead us to reach agreement); (2) the individual or group in question may be lazy, irrational, or otherwise unable or unwilling to proceed in a normative fashion from objective evidence to reasonable conclusions; and (3) the individual or group in question may be biased (either in interpreting the evidence or in proceeding from evidence to conclusions) by ideology, self-interest, or some other distorting influence.

Some Implications of Naive Realism

The first two tenets of naive realism deal with the tendency for people to believe that they see the world objectively, and that other reasonably attentive and objective perceivers will thus share their views. Relevant evidence is provided by research (see Neale & Bazerman, 1983; Thompson & Lowenstein, 1992) showing that disputants are overly optimistic in predicting the assessments of third-party judges and arbitrators. The question of more immediate interest, however, involves the consequences that ensue when people come to recognize that others do not share their views; that is, what happens when it becomes apparent that others have accepted different evidence as credible, or interpreted ambiguous evidence differently? What happens when people discover that

others hold very different priorities about which societal ills demand immediate attention no matter what the cost, and which ills are instead inevitable, bearable, or only appropriate to tackle after a careful cost-benefit analysis? How does the naive realist make sense of such differences in feelings and responses? It is to these questions, and to the implications of the third tenet of naive realism, that we now turn.

Overconfidence about Ability to Persuade Others

As naive realists, our initial interpretation of disagreements is apt to be relatively charitable. We are inclined to assume that the other party has not yet been exposed to the “way things are,” or has not yet been privy to the “real” facts and considerations. Indeed, we may even be so charitable as to concede that the other party may be privy to additional facts and considerations that might actually change our own views. In either case, this charitable interpretation of disagreement leads us to be confident – indeed, *overconfident* – that rational, open-minded dialog, in which information is freely exchanged, will lead to agreement or at least to an appreciable narrowing of disagreement. This optimism is likely to be short-lived, however, especially in the social and political arena. Repeated attempts at dialog with those on the other side make it quite clear that they rarely yield to our attempts to enlighten them, and that they rarely present new facts and arguments that persuade us to change our minds.

Given this state of affairs, less charitable interpretations of disagreement become inevitable, especially when our adversaries are persistent and outspoken and the issue is consequential. We conclude that our adversaries are biased by self-interest, ideology, or some other distorting top-down influence. We assume that these biases distort either their construal of relevant information or their capacity to proceed rationally and cogently from facts to conclusions. We feel that while we have proceeded in a logical bottom-up manner, from the available facts to reasonable construals and beliefs, those who hold opposing beliefs have done just the opposite (i.e., they have proceeded in top-down fashion, from preexisting motives and beliefs to biased interpretation). Indeed, a close examination of matters serves to sustain rather than allay such suspicions. We note that the rich favor lower taxes while the poor favor a higher minimum wage. We see the religious zealot interpret scientific evidence with injurious prejudice and an eye to the scriptures, while the atheist dismisses personal testimony about the power of prayer. What we fail to detect is the congruity between our own views and interests and the way *we* interpret evidence.

The Hostile Media/Mediator Effect

As noted at the outset of this chapter, opposing partisans exposed to the same set of “objective” facts interpret those facts differently as they fill in details of context and content, infer connections, and use idiosyncratic scripts and schemas in the search for coherence and meaning. Cognitive biases lead them to

see and remember a reality that is consistent with their beliefs and expectations, while motivational biases cause them to see what is consistent with their needs, wishes, and self-interest. Through such information-processing biases, two opposing partisans who encounter the same facts, historical accounts, scientific evidence, or even witness the same events can find additional support for their preconceptions. Thus, advocates and opponents of capital punishment, asked by Lord, Ross, and Lepper (1979) to review a pair of studies providing mixed results on the deterrent effects of capital punishment, later reported themselves to be even more polarized in their views than before. Similarly, the Princeton and Dartmouth football fans in Hastorf and Cantril's (1954) study who viewed the film of a then-recent hard-fought contest between their teams, seemingly saw two different games – each with a different balance of misdeeds by the two teams.

Pursuing the theme of this chapter, it is worth considering how the relevant partisans in those two studies would have responded to each other's assessments of the evidence or events in question, or to the assessments of a supposedly neutral third party. Suppose that a capital punishment proponent in the Lord et al. study heard a capital punishment opponent claim that the balance of evidence in the two studies they had read justified an end to legal executions, or suppose that some social scientist claimed that the two studies were equally probative and urged both partisan groups to moderate their positions accordingly. By the same token, suppose that the Hastorf and Cantril partisans were asked about the assessment of the game offered by the other school's commentators, or to rate the impartiality of the referee who had tried to assess penalties in an evenhanded manner. In both studies, we suspect, the partisan groups would feel that their counterparts were either lying for strategic reasons or guilty of bias in their perceptions and recollections. We further suspect that, in both instances, the two opposing groups would perceive a lack of objectivity on the part of the supposedly neutral adjudicator.

The conjecture that partisans' biased information processing would lead them to perceive bias on the part of disinterested third parties led Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985) to explore the *hostile media effect*. Capitalizing on longstanding, passionately held, differences of opinion about the Arab–Israeli conflict, these investigators presented pro-Israeli and pro-Arab partisans with identical samples of major network television coverage of the Beirut massacre. The reactions of these viewers showed that biased perceptions can indeed give rise to perceptions of bias (Fig. 36.2A). Pro-Arab and pro-Israeli viewers alike were convinced that the media had favored the other side, that their own side had been treated unfairly, and that the media's biases reflected the self-interest and ideology of those responsible for the program. There was also evidence, reminiscent of Hastorf and Cantril, that the groups in effect “saw” different programs (see Fig. 36.2B). Whereas pro-Israeli viewers claimed that the reports contained a greater percentage of material that was hostile to Israel than favorable, pro-Arab viewers made just the opposite assessment. Perhaps the most telling result

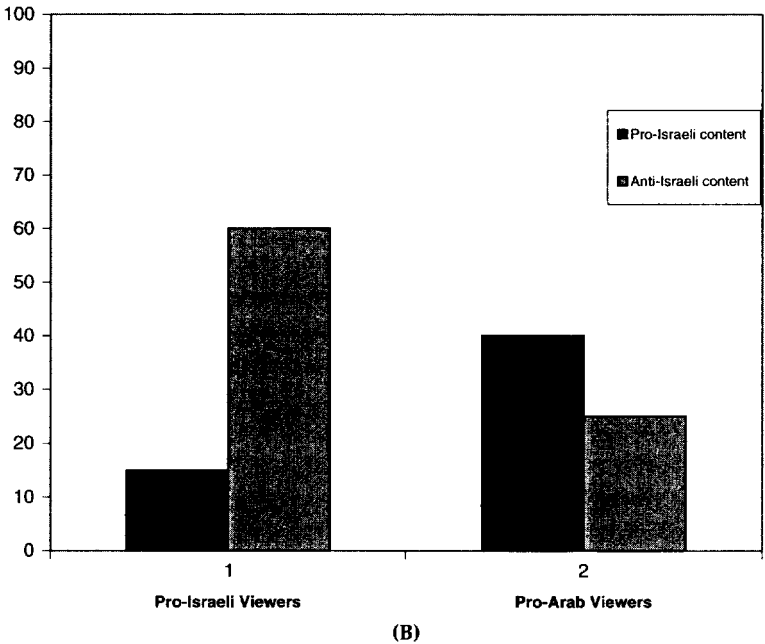
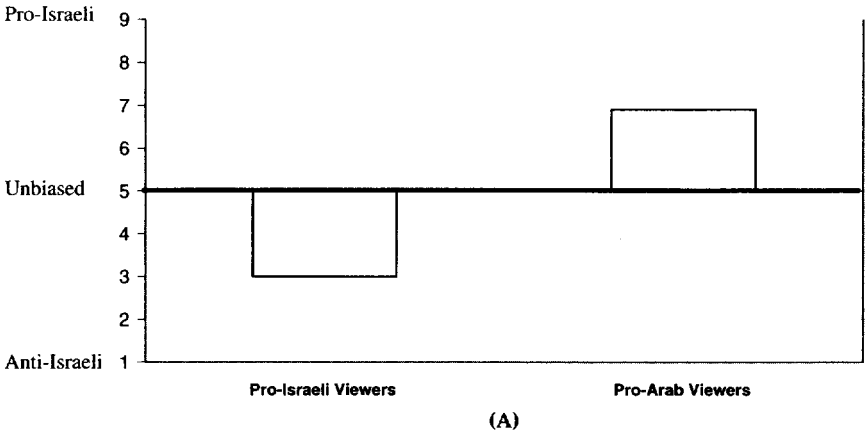


Figure 36.2. (A) Perceived bias in media sample. (B) Estimated percentage of pro-Israeli versus anti-Israeli content in media sample.

was both sides' concern that neutral viewers of the program would be swayed in the direction of their adversaries.

Could the same processes that lead partisans to perceive the media as hostile also lead them to hold a similarly jaundiced view of third-party mediators who are attempting to apply fair and consistent standards and give both sides a fair chance to make their case? A role-play study by Morris and Su (1999) confirmed this unhappy scenario. Neutral third parties trying to mediate a conflict between

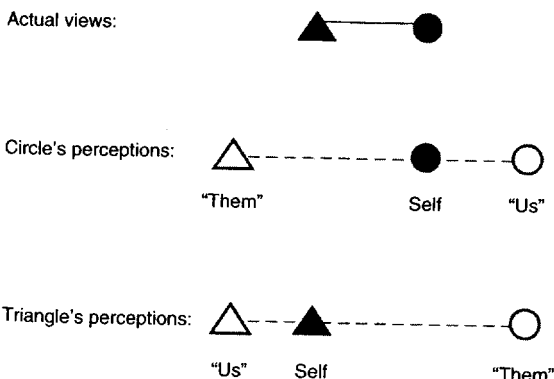
a “programming manager” and a “contract administrator” were perceived, by both parties, as having been more receptive and having devoted more time to the concerns of the other side.

The False Polarization Effect

In many contemporary social debates, such as those surrounding affirmative action, abortion policy, or welfare reform, the opposing partisans seem well aware that they construe facts and arguments differently from their adversaries. What exacerbates conflict, again, is the way the parties account for these differences. Both sides in the conflict believe that although their own views reflect the complexity, ambiguity, and contradictions of objective reality, the views of the other side have been dictated and distorted by ideology, self-interest, and other biases. These attributions in turn lead the conflicting partisans to see the other side as extreme, unreasonable, and unreachable. Assumptions about top-down processing may also lead partisans to overestimate the ideological consistency and extremity of those on their *own* side of the conflict. The result is an overestimation of the relevant construal gap between the modal views of the two sides and an underestimation of the amount of common ground that could serve as a basis for conciliation and constructive action. A schematic illustration of the relevant *false polarization effect*, one which uses circles and triangles to represent the views of opposing partisans, is presented in Fig. 36.3. This inaccurate and overly pessimistic assessment of differences in views becomes especially difficult to reverse when pessimism about the possibility of finding common ground makes the antagonists reluctant to engage in the type of frank dialogue that could reveal common interests and beliefs.

A pair of studies by Robinson, Keltner, Ward, and Ross (1995) has provided evidence for this false polarization effect. One study dealt with “pro-choice”

Figure 36.3. Actual versus perceived differences in partisan group views.



versus "pro-life" views relevant to the ongoing abortion rights debates (e.g., assumptions about which circumstances most often prompt decisions to abort and about the positive versus negative consequences likely to result from a tightening of abortion restrictions). The second study dealt with "liberal" versus "conservative" perceptions about specific events in the racially charged Howard Beach incident, in which an African American teenager was fatally injured by an automobile while running from a group of white pursuers (e.g., perceptions regarding the intentions and motives of the various participants in the incident).

Both studies, as one might expect, provided evidence of actual construal differences on the part of the "opposing" parties, and both studies further showed that the partisans greatly overestimated the magnitude of these differences. Nonpartisan respondents, it is worth noting, similarly tended to overestimate the ideological extremity and consistency of the two sides. They too underestimated the common ground in the opposing partisans' assumptions, beliefs, and values.

In one of several replications of the false polarization effect, Bastardi, Ross, and Lepper (1996) examined the real versus presumed "gender gap" in attitudes and beliefs concerning date rape, sexual harassment in the workplace, sex discrimination, and related concerns. As our conceptual analysis predicted, both men and women overestimated gender differences in attitudes; and both sexes overestimated the extremity and consistency not only of the views held by the opposite sex, but also of the views held by members of their same sex. Underestimation of common ground by opposing partisans was also demonstrated in a study by Robinson and Keltner (1996), which focused on instructors' views about the proper balance of traditional and nontraditional works in foundational English literature courses. They found that although "traditionalists," and to some extent "revisionists" as well, suspected that there would be little overlap in the reading lists they favored, the two groups' actual lists overlapped considerably. In other words, the chasm that they thought to be huge was actually rather narrow, and with some cooperation, easily bridgeable.

Thus far in accounting for the false polarization effect, we emphasized the role of naive realism and resulting presumptions of ideological consistency, extremism, and bias. Research in our laboratory suggests an additional, more social source of the phenomenon. During contentious discussions, many individuals choose to remain silent, and thereby leave misperceptions intact; those who do not remain silent generally hesitate to reveal any ambivalence in their beliefs. When addressing peers who seem to be on the other side of the issue, partisans seek mainly to defend their position rather than share doubts or complexities in their beliefs, lest their "concessions" give their adversaries "ammunition." When speaking with individuals whom they perceive to be on their own side, they similarly hesitate to reveal their doubts or appreciation for valid arguments of the other side – in this case, for fear that such ambivalence will be disapproved of by their peers, whom they (erroneously) assume to be fully resolved and free of ambivalence about the matter.

If such erroneous assumptions and self-presentation concerns play a role in perpetuating false polarization, a common prescription for helping adversaries move toward agreement may be ill-advised. Asking opposing partisans to sit down together, and inviting them to share their views and the reasons they hold them, might actually prove counterproductive, because such exchanges are apt to reinforce rather than weaken presumptions of extremity and intractability.

This hypothesis led us (Puccio & Ross, 1998) to conduct a series of studies contrasting two potential techniques for attenuating the false polarization bias. One technique simply invited partisans to express and defend their own position on a divisive issue, whereas the other technique essentially required them to express the best arguments they saw on the "other side." This *express-other-position* condition was designed to debias (or even counterbias) the partisans' social presentations, obliging them to reveal the very complexities, doubts, and uncertainties in their views that they might normally conceal, and in so doing to offer their peers and adversaries alike a more accurate portrait of their real views.

The results of our studies confirmed these predictions. Partisans in the express-own-position condition in these studies showed the expected false polarization effect, markedly overestimating the gap between the positions of the two sides. By contrast, participants in the express-other-position condition (and, in one study, those in a third condition in which they expressed both positions) hardly overestimated this gap at all. It is unsurprising, perhaps, that participants saw peers and adversaries as less extreme after those individuals had articulated and even acknowledged the other side's arguments. What is noteworthy, however, is that interpersonal assessments based on such artificially biased presentations proved to be more accurate than assessments based on the participants' unconstrained presentations of their actual views.

ACTOR-OBSERVER DIFFERENCE IN PERCEPTIONS OF BIAS

Implicit in our discussion of biases contributing to conflict and misunderstanding is the assumption that people recognize or presume the influence of such biases more readily when they are evaluating other actors' responses than when they are evaluating their own. While we have thus far emphasized attributions involving self-interest or ideological bias, the phenomenon in question is broader. That is, laypeople may be well aware of most of the biases that social psychologists and judgment and decision-making researchers have documented over the last few decades. But the sophistication that laypeople show as "intuitive psychologists" may make its influence felt primarily in social perception rather than self perception.

There is, of course, a long history of research comparing and contrasting the processes of social perception and self perception (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934; Bem, 1972; Nisbett & Ross, 1980, Chapter 9). Most relevant to present concerns, perhaps, is the suggestion by Jones and Nisbett (1971) that a variety

of motivational, perceptual, and informational factors lead people to be more *dispositionist* – that is, more inclined to infer stable traits and dispositions while overlooking the determinative influence of situational or contextual factors – in the attributions they make about other people’s behavior than in the attributions they make about their own behavior. Andersen (1984; also Andersen & Ross, 1984) suggests a source of actor–observer differences in attributions that is particularly relevant to our present concerns. That source involves the access that actors enjoy to their private thoughts, feelings, and interpretations of stimuli. In particular, Andersen showed that people give heavy weight to such nonobservable events in stipulating the characteristics that are most revealing or even defining of them, but not in stipulating the characteristics that are revealing or defining of others.

In a somewhat similar vein, Kahneman and Lovallo (1993) stressed the role of private experience in distinguishing between “inside” and “outside” perspectives in decision making. Actors’ predictions about their outcomes and prospects are likely to be heavily influenced by the access they enjoy to their own plans, goals, level of motivation or commitment, and by their awareness of the countermeasures they will take should any of several obstacles arise. Observers who lack such insider information, by contrast, are likely to ignore particular features of the case at hand. They give little weight to the actors’ expressions of confidence or even to the specifics of their plans and intentions, and give much heavier weight than the actor to base-rate information about the outcome of similar undertakings by this actor and others.

Consistent with this analysis, Buehler, Griffin, and Ross (1994, Study 5) found that although actors consistently commit the *planning fallacy* by underestimating how long it will take them to complete a given task, observers do not. Indeed, when provided with a description of a task and both the actor’s self-predicted completion time and relevant base-rate data (i.e., the actor’s memories of completion times for relevant previous tasks), observers tended to *overestimate* how long the actor would take. However, when the observers were exposed to the actor’s insider perspective (i.e., actor’s mental plans for completing the task), their estimates about completion time approached the actor’s own (unduly optimistic) estimates.

We note again, however, that our present concern lies not with differences between actor and observer assessments, or even with actor–observer differences in accuracy. Rather, our concern lies with the perceptions that people have about the status of their own assessments versus those offered by other people. In particular, as implied in our account of naive realism, we contend that people perceive their own views and sentiments about the world, and its problems and opportunities, to be more on target – and less susceptible to the various biases that afflict human judgment – than the views and sentiments of their peers.

There is a sense in which this proposition about invidious comparison of own versus other’s assessment of the world is a truism. In any particular assessment,

one must feel that one's particular assessment is the most reasonable one given the information at hand (otherwise, one presumably would adjust that assessment to make it more reasonable). Furthermore, because other actors necessarily offer some assessments that differ from our own, we are bound to feel that they are less wise and realistic than we are, at least until unfolding events impose a more objective and data-based standard for such comparisons.

Assessments made about the self are particularly pertinent to our present discussion. In such assessments, we are apt to regard the products of our own insider perspective as a gold standard against which assessments made by others can be measured. By contrast, in the case of assessments made about others, we are not apt to regard those individuals' self-assessments as the standard against which our assessments or those of all other observers should be measured.

Consider the case of a female professor who gives the highest grade in the class to an unusually handsome young man who sat close to the front of the room, gazed intently at her throughout lectures, responded eagerly when she posed questions to the class, often came to her office to seek clarification of particular lecture points, and wrote an exceptionally long and interesting paper in fulfillment of the only formal course requirement. From the professor's insider perspective, the student deserved the highest grade both because of his paper and because of his exemplary in-class contributions. Moreover, she is aware of specific steps she took to guarantee objectivity in grading and of the strong value she places on fairness. Now consider another student in the same class, one who sat quietly toward the back of the room and earned a lower grade in spite of what she felt to be a great deal of effort, and who personally has been unimpressed with the professor's "star pupil" in a couple of conversations. This student is apt to be less certain about the professor's objectivity. Furthermore, if the unimpressed peer makes her views about the male student known to the professor, or complains that the professor is a "sucker" for a handsome face and sycophantic behavior, and has succumbed to the "halo effect" in her grading of essays, the professor is very likely to believe that she understands the *real* source of the female student's protests – perhaps better than the student herself.

Our characterization of naive realism and the biased assessments that people offer of their own and others' capacity to discern the "truth" goes beyond matters of perceived objectivity. Even when an individual recognizes that her views are in part the product of her unique status or particular set of life experiences, the individual is apt to feel that her status and experiences have been a source of *enlightenment* rather than error.

A female administrator who defends the university's decision to eliminate the men's wrestling team and add a woman's water polo team is apt to face a charge from her male colleagues that she has been biased by her gender. She, in turn, may acknowledge that her own experiences as a woman in university administration (and her earlier experiences as a star intramural softball player, with no opportunity to compete on a varsity team) played a role in shaping

her present views and perhaps account for the passion with which she defends them. Yet she would vehemently deny that she is showing the kind of gender bias that her male counterparts showed for years in favoring an all-male athletic program. On the contrary, she would insist that her college and professional experiences help her to understand the magnitude of the disadvantages that women in general and women athletes in particular have faced. (At the same time, however, she may be relatively skeptical and sense the “same old” male gender bias when the wrestling coach talks of his own earlier frustrations as a student wrestler who received less support than athletes in revenue-producing sports, and insists that male wrestlers are currently being unfairly deprived of a valuable experience in order to meet an unfair gender quota.)

By the same token, members of various ethnic groups sometimes feel that only a member of their own group really understands the issues that affect them. However, they feel that members of other ethnic groups are hopelessly, if understandably, biased by their particular status and experiences, and cannot be given “veto power” over policies that affect them.

In concluding this chapter, we first review evidence that people make invidious distinctions between their ability to render enlightened judgments about others and others’ ability to render enlightened judgments about them. We also explore some specific hypotheses about the source of such invidious distinctions. Then we turn our attention to lay perceptions about susceptibility of self and others to specific types or sources of bias – both in the context of everyday judgment and decision making and in the context of intergroup conflict.

Perceptions of Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Insight

Our discussion of naive realism and insider versus outsider perspectives gives rise to the following four hypotheses about lay perceptions of self-knowledge and knowledge of others (see Pronin, Kruger, Savitsky, & Ross, 2001):

1. People perceive their own self-knowledge and insight to be more accurate and complete than that of other people.
2. People perceive their knowledge of other people to be more accurate and complete than other people’s knowledge of them.
3. People perceive the discrepancy between their self-knowledge and other people’s knowledge of them to be greater than the corresponding discrepancy between other people’s self-knowledge and their knowledge of those other people.
4. People perceive their group’s knowledge of other groups to be more accurate and complete than other groups’ knowledge of their group.

In an initial exploration of the first three of these hypotheses, Pronin et al. (2001) simply asked roommates to complete a survey. In this survey, respondents evaluated how well they knew themselves, how well they knew their roommate, how well their roommate knew them, and how well their roommate

knew himself or herself, with respect to domains ranging from specific traits (e.g., competitiveness) and behaviors (e.g., frequency of looking in the mirror) to more general knowledge about thoughts, feelings, and motives. The results provided evidence for all three hypotheses. In virtually every domain, people rated their self-knowledge to be superior to their roommate's self-knowledge, and their knowledge about their roommate to be greater than vice versa. They also indicated that although they sometimes knew their roommates as well as, if not better than, their roommates knew themselves, there were no domains in which their roommates matched or exceeded the participants' own self-knowledge. Figure 36.4 shows a summary of results from this study and three related studies reported in the same article, which we describe later. Further analysis suggested that participants were most skeptical of the accuracy of their roommates' self-knowledge relative to their own when the traits in question were negative (e.g., messiness, susceptibility to flattery, inability to handle stress) rather than neutral or positive (e.g., risk-taking, giving weight to moral considerations), and when they pertained to private thoughts and feelings rather than overt behavior.

Subsequent studies by Pronin et al. (2001) revealed that people show this asymmetry not only in assessments of intrapersonal and interpersonal insight on the part of roommates with whom they interact on a daily basis, but also in assessments of how much they learn about strangers, and vice versa, from observing small, dubiously informative samples of behavior. In one such study, previously unacquainted individuals were given a chance to get to know each other by taking turns asking relatively innocuous personal questions of their choosing (e.g., "Where do you hope to see yourself in ten years?" or "What would your ideal vacation be?"). Participants generally believed that they learned more about the other person from the brief encounter than the other person learned about them. This perception was revealed both in ratings of how much each learned about the other (in terms of traits, preferences, etc.) and also in the length of written descriptions about what they had learned (see Fig. 36.4).

A similar result was obtained in a third study in which participants both furnished completions of word fragments and read the completions of another participant. Participants saw their "partner's" responses as more self-revealing than they did their own (see Fig. 36.4). They typically saw their own responses as either situationally determined (that is, as suggested by the fragment, or cued by a previous response) or as an essentially random and uninformative reflection of their momentary state of mind, while they saw their partners' responses as reflective of personal traits or dispositions. In other words, they seemed well aware of the folly involved in attaching much significance to their spontaneous and rather haphazard answers, but less aware of the folly involved in making inferences about their partners on the basis of the same type of information. As in the brief encounter study, they recognized their partners' susceptibility to bias, misinterpretation, and especially over-interpretation when their partners made inferences about them on the basis of the meager information provided,

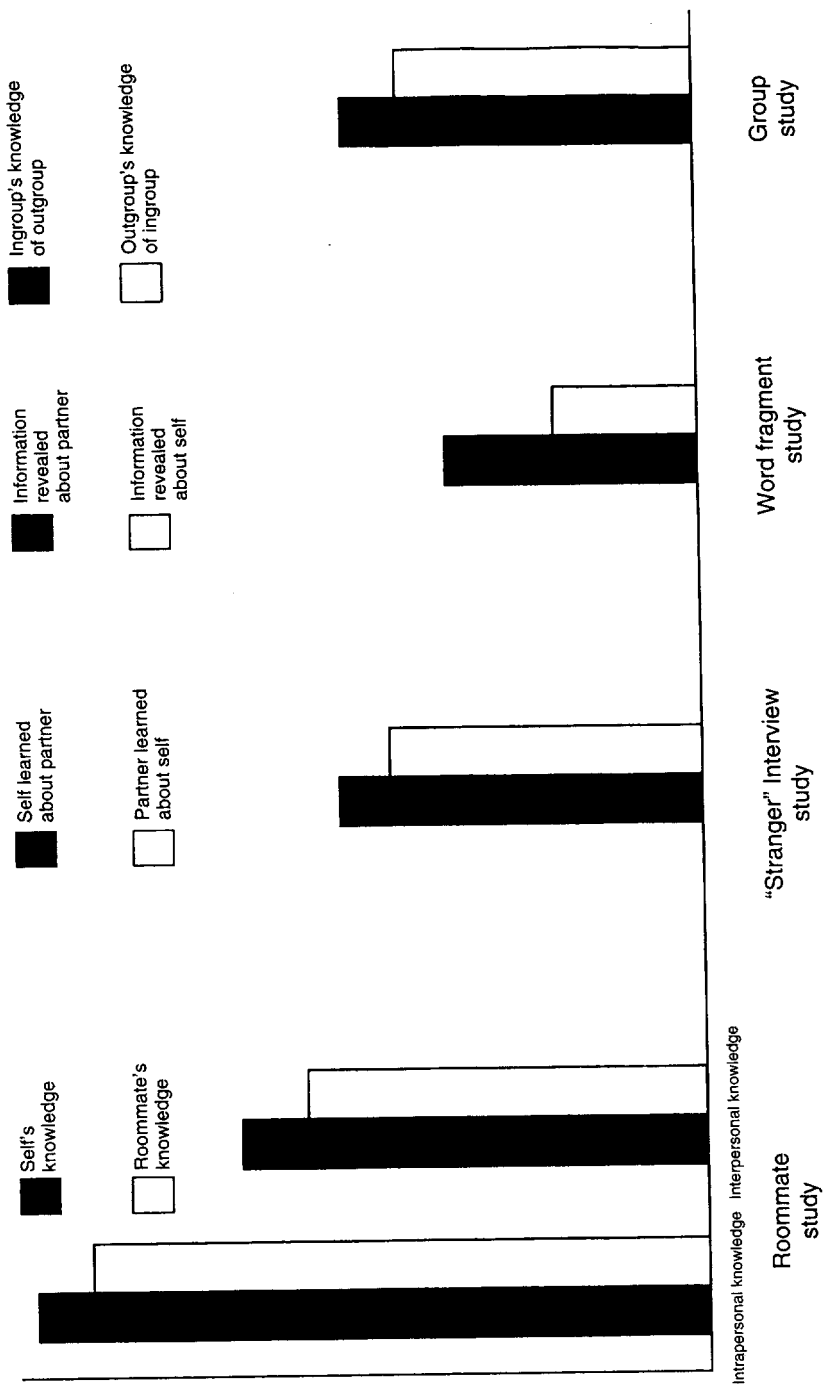


Figure 36.4. Asymmetric assessments of self and other knowledge across four studies. Different scales and different measures were used in the different studies. The histogram was adjusted to compensate for these differences, but otherwise reflects both the size of the relevant self—other differences and the absolute amounts of knowledge in the relevant domain. Pairs of bars are significantly different.

but they did not recognize the likelihood that they would be equally susceptible to those failings when they made inferences about their partners on a similar basis.

Interestingly, participants in this study showed this self–other asymmetry only when they assessed the diagnosticity of their partners' completions *before* providing and assessing their own completions. In other words, the tendency to make overly confident trait inferences about the actor whose responses one was considering seemed, at least in this study, to be forestalled by the prior opportunity to ponder the determinants of one's own responses.

In a final study, Pronin et al. (2001) found evidence for similar biases and asymmetries in perceptions of accuracy and bias at the *group* level. That is, individuals claimed that the political groups to which they belonged (e.g., liberals versus conservatives, pro-choice versus pro-life advocates) knew and understood their counterparts better than vice versa (see Fig. 36.4). The same tendency was also true for men's and women's perceptions about each other's insights, although the relevant asymmetry in this case was masked somewhat by the fact that both sexes agreed that women understood men better than men understood women. The women simply thought this gap was greater!

What accounts for the impression or belief that we know them better than vice versa? One possibility relevant to our present concerns, suggested by Quattrone and Jones (1980), is the conviction that the members of other groups (i.e., "they") are simply more homogeneous and therefore more easily characterized than the members of our group (i.e., "we"). This conviction, in turn, may arise from a tendency to view other groups' responses (just as we view other individuals' responses) as more dictated by self-interest, ideology, or other top-down influences than those of our own group. In any case, there is ample research evidence that individual group members believe that members of the other group fail to appreciate their group's diversity or variability, and see them in a stereotyped manner (Linville, Fischer, & Salovey, 1989; Park & Judd, 1990). Indeed, a pilot study conducted in our own laboratory (Pronin & Berger, 1999) suggests that students who live in two residences subject to campus-wide stereotypes (i.e., as the "jock frat" and "hippie house") each believed that their house would recognize the diversity in the responses of residents of the other house more than vice versa. A more specific source of the belief that they are more misinformed and less knowledgeable about us than vice versa, is further suggested by this pilot study. Respondents believed that inhabitants of the other house gave more credence to stereotypes and propaganda about their house than vice versa.

In the concluding section of this chapter, we essentially generalize the foregoing argument. We document the fact that people think that other people in general (and those who disagree with them in particular) are more subject than themselves not just to stereotyping and effects of propaganda, but to many of the other biases that psychologists and other social scientists have increasingly devoted attention to over the past few years. We also explore some

sources of this perceived asymmetry in an attempt to understand why it occurs, and therefore when it is most likely to be pronounced and when it is likely to disappear.

Assessing Biases in Others versus Self

In a questionnaire study, we (Pronin, Lin, & Ross, 2002) asked Stanford students the extent to which they and the "average American" displayed a variety of different inferential or judgmental biases that our conceptual analysis led us to believe would be subject to invidious self–other comparisons. The list included self-serving or ego-defensive attribution of success versus failure, dissonance reduction after free choice, the halo effect, biased assimilation of information to preexisting beliefs or preconceptions, reactive devaluation of offers and compromises received from the "other side," unwarranted perception of media hostility to one's group or cause, and an inclination to underestimate the role of situational as opposed to dispositional determinants of behavior. Each bias was described in a couple of simple jargon-free sentences of the following sort:

Psychologists have claimed that people show a 'self-serving' tendency in the way they view their academic or job performance. That is, they tend to take credit for success but deny responsibility for failure; they see their successes as the result of personal qualities, like drive or ability, but their failures as the result of external factors, like unreasonable work requirements or inadequate instruction.

As anticipated (Fig. 36.5), the students claimed that they personally displayed each of the relevant biases to a lesser degree than the "Average American," with the average discrepancy constituting about one standard deviation on the relevant 9-point scale.

We further obtained survey evidence that the phenomenon in question was neither restricted to the perhaps atypically smug population of Stanford students nor a reflection of some highly general tendency for people to deny all personal shortcomings. This second survey used a sample of travelers awaiting flights at the San Francisco Airport. It included not only the items used in our Stanford survey, but also additional items pertaining to personal limitations or biases that would likely be at least as salient to the actor as the observer (e.g., fear of public speaking, procrastination, the planning fallacy) and therefore, according to our conceptual analysis, an unlikely source of invidious self–other comparisons. The results of this study both replicated our earlier results and supported our prediction about when the phenomenon should and should not occur. Thus, although our airport sample again made invidious self–other comparisons regarding the tendency to engage in ego-defensive attributions, commit the fundamental attribution error, act in a self-interested manner, and *overestimate* media hostility against the positions or causes they favor, they did not see themselves as less afraid of public speaking, less guilty of procrastination, or less susceptible to the planning fallacy.

The results of a third survey in this series further attest to the inability of people to perceive biases in themselves – even in the face of an explicit prompt about

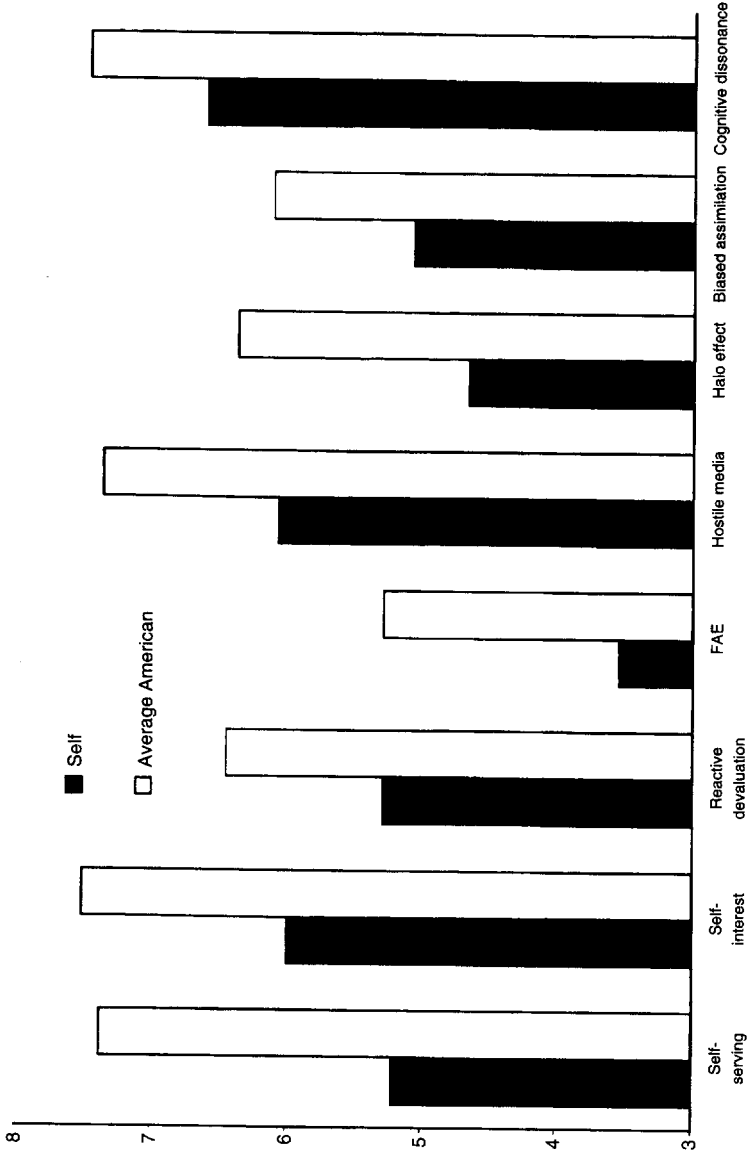


Figure 36.5. Perceptions of bias in self versus the "average American." Ratings were provided on 9-point scales (1 = no bias; 9 = strong bias). Pairs of bars are significantly different. FAE = Fundamental attribution error.

the prevalence of that bias. In this study, participants first rated themselves relative to their Stanford peers on a variety of dimensions (i.e., dependability, objectivity, consideration for others, snobbery, deceptiveness, and selfishness). As is generally the case in such studies, the great majority (87%) showed the familiar tendency to rate themselves more positively than their peers with respect to these characteristics (see Alicke et al., 1995).

After offering these ratings, however, participants were informed on the next page of the questionnaire that

Studies have shown that on the whole people show a “better than average” effect when assessing themselves relative to other members within their group. That is, 70–80% of individuals consistently rate themselves “better than average” on qualities that they perceive as positive and, conversely, evaluate themselves as having “less than average” amounts of characteristics that they believe are negative.

They were then asked to indicate what they thought the “most accurate, valid, and objective measures available” would show about them. Given this opportunity to acknowledge the likelihood that they had succumbed to the bias in question, only 24% of the participants who had shown the relevant self-enhancement bias did so. That means that 76% of the participants indicated that they expected the “most accurate and object measures available” to show either that they had rated themselves perfectly accurately, or that they had rated themselves too *modestly!*

Underestimating Bias in the Self. As Wilson, Hodges, and La Fleur (1995) provocatively noted, “People are often unaware of their own unawareness” (p. 17). Four biases that we mentioned earlier seem to hinge at least in part on such lack of awareness. The most general of these biases is the much researched and highly robust *false consensus effect* (Ross, Greene, & House, 1977). As noted earlier, this bias seems to depend on the individual’s failure to recognize that his or her estimates of response consensus (and the appropriate interpretation to place on the two response alternatives) have been heavily influenced by the particular way in which those alternatives are construed. The individual who shows the false consensus effect fails to recognize that other respondents might construe those alternatives differently, and as a result make a different choice; indeed, the individual fails to recognize that any construal is involved.

Other more specific biases can be seen as special cases or by-products of the false consensus effect. One example is the *third-person effect* (Davidson, 1983; see also Gunther, 1995; Innes & Zeitz, 1988), which refers to the tendency for people to believe that other respondents, on average, are more influenced than they by “propaganda” or other types of information that they feel ought to be dismissed out of hand. Presumably, individuals who see a message as persuasive and reasonable are apt to assume that other recipients of the message will feel likewise (and deem acceptance of the relevant message as normative rather than indicative of susceptibility to bias). At the same time, individuals who see the message as unpersuasive and hateful may be inclined to fear that others,

especially others who have a vested interest in accepting such a message, will view it uncritically and succumb to its influence. The net effect of combining estimates that others will be “appropriately” persuaded whenever we are persuaded, and estimates that at least some others will be “inappropriately” persuaded, even when we are not, should be clear – that is, an overall tendency to overestimate the message’s impact. (See Hoorens & Ruiter, 1996, for evidence that people do not see themselves as less amenable to persuasion than their peers, just as more discerning in evaluating the value of the messages.)

Research by Armor (1998) provides more direct evidence about perceived and actual objectivity of self versus others. In one study, this investigator introduced participants to a number of problems used to demonstrate normative violations in judgment and inference (for example, “base-rate neglect” or violation of the “conjunction rule”). As predicted, participants both underestimated their susceptibility to the relevant inferential shortcomings and perceived themselves to be less susceptible than their peers. Once again, this tendency for people to overestimate their own objectivity is perhaps inevitable, because people would presumably change their assessment in the appropriate direction in any instance in which they recognized that the response of a peer (or any other particular response available to them) was more objective or normative than their own. To make accurate assessments of our objectivity, we must recognize and make allowance for the fact that (notwithstanding our impressions about individual assessments we are making) we are likely in many instances to be unobjective, and in error – in fact, to be in error just as often as our peers who seem to be making less reasonable assessments than we are every time their assessments differ from our own.

Overestimating Bias in Others. There is ample evidence that people recognize that their peers are subject to a variety of biases. Researchers have demonstrated people’s awareness of others’ susceptibility to the actor versus observer bias in the attribution process (Krueger, Ham, & Linford, 1996), the false consensus effect (Krueger & Zeiger, 1993), the correspondence bias (Van Boven, Kamada, & Gilovich, 1999), the influence of self-interest (Epley & Dunning, 2000; Kruger & Gilovich, 1999; Miller & Ratner, 1998), and the motivating power of extrinsic rewards (Heath, 1999).

Not only are people aware of the judgmental biases we have listed, there is evidence that people may actually overestimate their magnitude, especially when the potentially biased judgments are being made about *them*. Thus, Van Boven, Kamada, and Gilovich (1999) found that actors in an experiment assumed that observers would make even more extreme dispositional inferences about them than proved to be the case. As the authors note, people assume that those evaluating their responses will be “no-holds-barred” dispositionalists, and that they alone assign appropriate weight to person and situation in their attributions.

A completely different and more motivational set of naive theories seem involved in lay assumptions and overestimations when it comes to assessing the impact of ego-defensive or self-serving biases. In one such set of studies, Kruger

and Gilovich (1999) found that participants were overly "cynical" in their predictions about how others would allocate responsibility for successes and failures. That is, they believed others would claim too much credit for success and too little blame for failure, when in fact individuals tended to allocate too much personal responsibility for both types of outcomes (see also Ross & Sicoly, 1979).

This tendency for people to see others as more self-serving than they are may occur in part because lay explanations for attributions that seem congruent with the actor's self interest are overly motivational or at least overly simplistic. (See Nisbett & Ross, 1980 for an account of nonmotivational determinants of such bias; see also Dunning, Perie, & Story, 1991, and Kunda, 1987, for more sophisticated accounts of the sometimes subtle interaction between motivational and cognitive determinants.) In any case, introspection about our own assessments regarding our actions and attributes are apt to reveal no simple motive (or at least no simple conscious motive) to think well of ourselves at all costs, and the feedback most of us get from our friends is apt to suggest that we are just as inclined to be too hard on ourselves as too easy.

Evidence that people see themselves as less guilty of self-serving attributional biases than others comes from a study by Friedrich (1996), who simply described the self-serving bias and asked participants how subject they were to it relative to the average person. Participants rated themselves as significantly less prone than others to this bias. It is important to note, however, that people are not completely unaware that their own positive self-assessments reflect idiosyncratic cognitive processes. In a study by Krueger (1998), the positive correlation between people's assessments of the desirability of a particular trait and the extent to which they ascribed that traits to themselves (see also Dunning, Perie, & Story, 1991) was accompanied by the participants' recognition that their self-ascriptions would be *less* strongly correlated with *others'* ratings of trait desirability than their own ratings. Krueger's participants, we suspect, would have denied showing motivated self-enhancement, and have claimed that they simply try to behave in a manner consistent with the values they personally deem important. Indeed, by their own criteria, they may well have felt that other people were less enlightened than themselves about which traits are important (or even that other people's ratings of trait importance were biased by their knowledge of their own personal strengths and shortcomings).

Not only do we view others' attributions as more self-serving than our own, we have similar views about behavior and general motives for action. In a provocative set of experiments on the "myth of self-interest," Miller and Ratner (1998) demonstrated that individuals judge others according to a naive theory that attaches great weight to naked self-interest. For example, they found that participants overestimated other people's tendency to be influenced by economic incentives in deciding whether or not to donate blood and overestimated other people's tendency to be influenced by their group membership (as a woman or a smoker) in determining their views about abortion or smoking

restrictions. Furthermore, they expected others to behave in a manner consistent with self-interest regardless of whether they reported that their own behavior would be similarly guided. In a related line of research, Heath (1999) has shown that people assume others' on-the-job motivation is rooted in extrinsic financial incentives, while they report their own motives to be more rooted in intrinsic incentives such as the opportunity to learn new skills.

In a final set of studies to be considered, Epley and Dunning (2000) showed that people judge others' pro-social behavior in given situations (e.g., cooperating in a Prisoner's Dilemma Game, donating money to a nonprofit organization) to be more self-serving and less purely altruistic than their own. Interestingly, and in contrast to the Miller and Ratner findings cited earlier, individuals showing this "holier than thou" effect were more accurate in their predictions regarding others than in predictions regarding themselves; that is, rather than underestimating others' altruism, they overestimated their own. Both sets of findings, however, seem to reflect the difference in insider versus outsider perspectives that we have discussed at several points in this chapter. In the Miller and Ratner study, the actors' insider perspective makes them aware that self-interest is not the sole or even the principal motive for their own choices, but this perspective offers no corresponding insight about the private feelings and motives of others. In the Epley and Dunning study, the actors apparently give too much weight to the "holy intentions" that underlie the resolution of their dilemmas, and in so doing these actors lack the objectivity of outside observers who consider other possibilities as well.

In a sense, the actor is like a detective with more clues than the observer, and with different clues enjoying high perceptual or cognitive salience. To the extent that the clues in question are in fact probative, the insider has the advantage over the outsider. To the extent that these clues are more salient than they are probative, the insider is at a disadvantage to any outsider who relies on simpler theories and more general base-rate assumptions. But in either case, the actor feels that his or her perspective is the one that affords greatest accuracy. And in either case, the actor is apt to feel frustrated or even angry with those who dispute the authenticity and special insight of his or her view of "reality."