Extremism, Power, and the Imagined Basis of Social Conflict

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The human being can . . . keep fighting and killing because we can goad ourselves with our concepts, our principles, our categorical imperatives to do whatever we feel we have to do. (Huxley, 1959, p. 75)

There is perhaps no more dangerous force in social relations than the human mind. People's capacities to categorize, interpret, and go "beyond the information given" readily lead to the stereotyping and dehumanization that escalate and entrench group conflict. In this article, we focus on opposing partisans' tendency to exaggerate their opponents' extremism and the magnitude of their conflict. We first present research documenting this bias, then consider how imagined extremism intensifies social conflicts, and conclude by discussing how partisans with power judge their conflicts in more biased ways than do partisans without power, but are themselves judged more accurately.

NAIVE REALISM IN SOCIAL CONFLICT

Our initial studies of social conflict examined whether ideological partisans judge their opponents' attitudes and positions accurately. We proposed that opposing partisans follow a straightforward inferential path to conclusions about their opponents' attitudes and preferences. We have called this inferential process *naive realism* (Robinson, Keltner, Ward, & Ross, 1995). Naive realism has three tenets: First, people assume they see the world objectively, thereby underestimating the subjective forces that shape their perception and judgment; second, people assume that others base their judgments on this same "objective" reality; and third, partisans attribute the cause of judgments that deviate from their own, such as the judgments of their opposition, to ideological bias. Based on this formulation, we hypothesized that opposing partisans to social disputes will exaggerate (a) the magnitude of their conflict, (b) their opposition's extremism, and (c) their opposition's ideological biases.

POLARIZED CONFLICT

In testing these three hypotheses, we have surveyed the attitudes of opposing partisans to the conflicts over abortion, racial violence, criminal justice, government budget cuts, and the Western Canon (i.e., the liberal arts curriculum). Participants in these studies have included both partisans recruited for their strong convictions and activism and nonpartisan individuals. These participants have offered their own attitudes toward issues central to the disputes in question and estimated the attitudes of typical members of both sides. We compared opposing partisans' actual differences with the differences they perceived to exist between themselves, their own side, and their opposition. At the heart of these studies was a simple question: Do opposing partisans perceive their conflict accurately?

Exaggerated Differences

Across conflicts, opposing partisans' actual attitudes differed clearly. For example, in assessing the consequences of making abortion illegal, pro-choice partisans were more likely than pro-life partisans to believe that women would die from illegal abortions, whereas pro-life partisans were more likely than pro-choice partisans to believe that unwanted babies would be successfully adopted. Traditionalists in the Western Canon debate advocated the prominence of Western European civilization in the liberal arts curriculum, whereas revisionists advocated teaching diverse cultural traditions. Social conflict, as Solomon Asch argued in the 1950s, stems from opposing partisans' different construals of the concepts, facts, principles, and legal and policy matters relevant to a dispute.

Comparison of partisans' actual and perceived differences, however, lends credence to Huxley's admonition that escalated conflict is the product of social misperception. Figure 1 presents a comparison of the actual differences in partisans' attitudes with partisans' estimates of those differences across studies of (a) students' attitudes toward cuts in the U.S. government budget; (b) pro-choice and pro-life partisans' attitudes toward abortion; (c) liberals' and conservatives' attitudes toward the events surrounding the Howard Beach incident, in which a young black man was killed on a
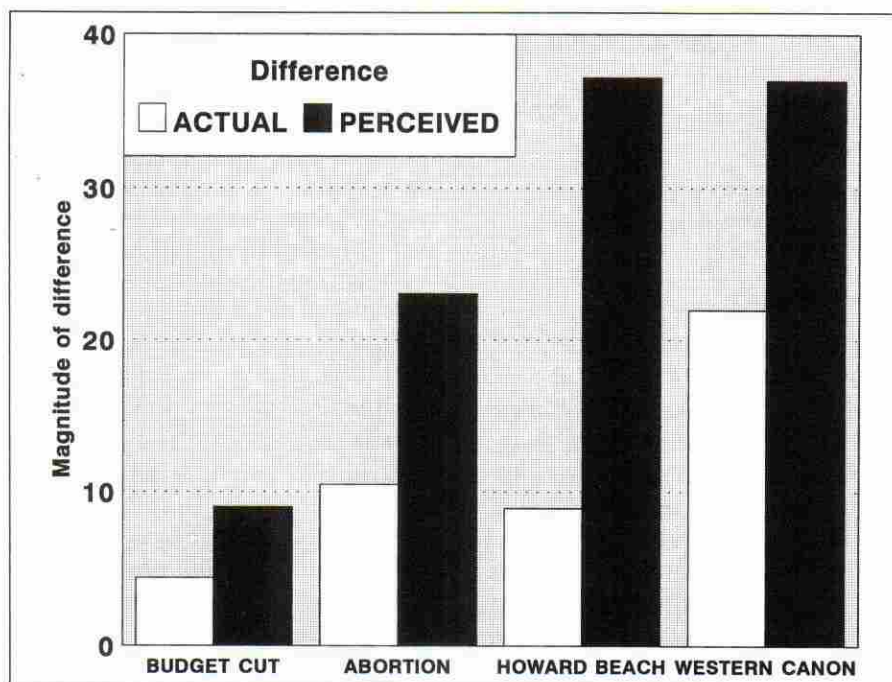
Fig. 1. Actual and perceived differences between attitudes of opposing sides in four social conflicts. Difference scores reflect raw scores that have been converted to proportion scores to allow for comparison across studies. See the text for an explanation of the conflicts.

freeway while escaping white pursuers; and (d) revisionists' and traditionalists' attitudes toward literature and a liberal arts education (the Western Canon debate). Opposing partisans and nonpartisans typically assumed that the difference between the two sides' attitudes was one and one half to four times greater than the actual difference. Whereas opposing partisans' attitudes usually shared common ground, opposing partisans assumed their differences with their opponents were absolute.

Our study of the Western Canon dispute examined whether partisans also overestimate the differences in their concrete behavior (Robinson & Keltner, 1996). From a list of 50 literary works, which included works of traditional authors (e.g., Joyce, Melville, Shakespeare) and revisionist authors (e.g., Douglass, Morrison, Wright), English professors in California universities selected 15

books they would teach in a hypothetical introductory English course and 15 books they believed their opponents would teach. Revisionists and traditionalists actually chose 7 of the same books (e.g., *Macbeth, The Canterbury Tales, The Iliad*). Both sides, however, and traditionalists in particular, underestimated how many books they actually selected in common with their opponents. Studies of real-world and laboratory negotiations likewise find that negotiators with compatible interests—for example, buyers and sellers with overlapping bargaining ranges—underestimate their common ground and as a consequence settle for outcomes that are less desirable than available outcomes (Thompson & Hrebec, in press).

Extremist Partisans and Lone Moderates

Consistent with our second naive-realism hypothesis, opposing

partisans overestimated their opposition's extremism. To our surprise, opposing partisans also exaggerated the extremism of their own side. Figure 2 presents liberal and conservative partisans' actual attitudes toward the Howard Beach incident in the top row and their respective estimates of the two sides' attitudes in the second and third rows. Higher scores indicate more sympathy for the black victim; lower scores indicate less sympathy for the black victim and greater endorsement for the white defendants' position. As one can see in Figure 2, both sides judged themselves to possess less extreme attitudes than typical members of their opposition and their own side; that is, both sides perceived themselves to be lone moderates. This lone-moderate finding deviates from two robust findings in social psychology. First, individuals generally judge their own group more favorably than other groups (Brewer & Kramer, 1985), yet partisans in our studies perceived both the outgroup and their own group to be extremist and biased (see the next section). Second, individuals typically judge themselves to be above the average, for example, in their abilities or likely successes (Fiske & Taylor, 1991), but partisans in our studies believed that their attitudes were less intense than those of average partisans. Partisans' sense of lone moderateness and unwillingness to endorse their own group's attitudes may mirror the lack of connection the public at large feels toward ideological issues and representatives.

Perceived Ideological Bias and Political Motives

Consistent with the final naive-realism prediction, opposing partisans indicated that they were more objective, fairer to the evidence,
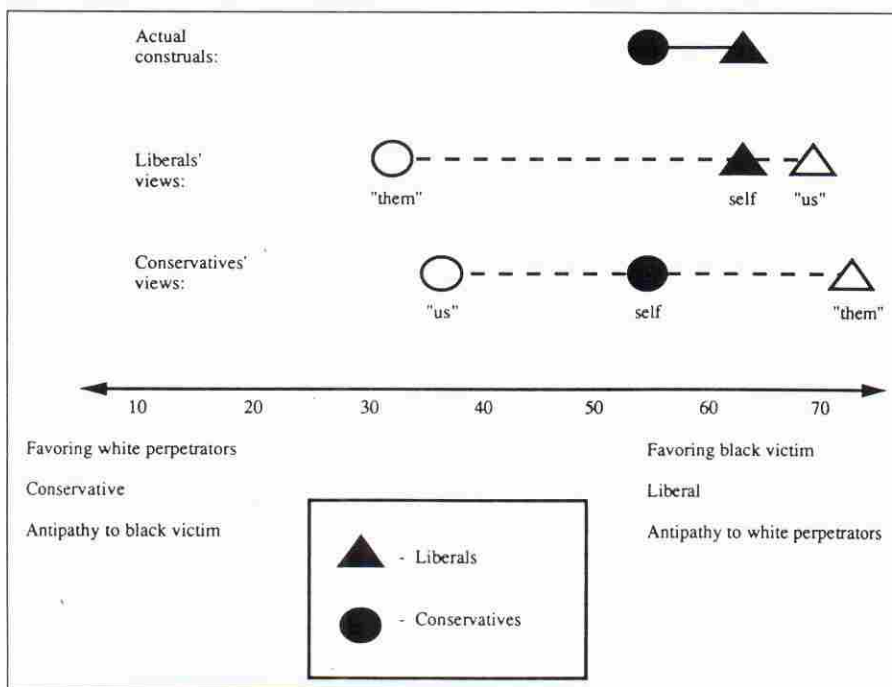
Fig. 2. Actual (top row) and perceived (second and third rows) differences between politically liberal and conservative participants in their interpretations of the Howard Beach incident. See the text for additional explanation.

and freer from bias, especially political bias, than their opponents. In addition, and to our surprise, they indicated that they were more objective, fairer, and less biased than partisans on their own side. Partisans further assume, other research has shown, that their opposition will sacrifice other people's needs and pragmatic concerns to advance its own ideological and political agendas. In the Western Canon study, an independent group of English instructors rated the political ideology and educational value of the two sides' book selections. Revisionists' and traditionalists' own book selections, although differing in political ideology, proved to be of comparably high educational value. But both sides, and traditionalists in particular, assumed that their opponents would select books that were very politically biased and lower in educational value than their own selections.

Closer inspection of these findings (see Table 1) reveals traditionalists' racial stereotyping of revisionists' book selections. Whereas revisionists chose a balance of works by revisionist and traditional authors, traditionalists assumed that revisionists would exclusively choose works by women and minorities. Traditionalists erroneously attributed race-based political motives to revisionists, a tendency we believe is quite common in contemporary social disputes. Today's culture wars, fought in the schools and universities, the workplace, and the media, may stem, at least in part, from the erroneous and simplistic notion that the opposition's agenda may be reduced to gender, ethnic, or racial stereotypes. Ironically, those partisans who attempt to separate race or gender politics from policy decisions, for example, traditionalists in the Western Canon study, may be the most prone to infer hostile political motives from their opposition's identity. For example, whereas gay activists often argue their claims on the basis of civil, constitutional, and human rights, opponents of such groups decry such activism as the promotion of a "homosexual agenda."

IMAGINED EXTREMISM AND GROUP DYNAMICS

Partisans and nonpartisans assume ideological extremism is typical and common ground between opposing sides nonexistent. These simple assumptions determine the very course of social conflicts: who participates, who defines the agendas, how group decisions are made, and the character of negotiations. As factions form in response to socially divisive issues, extremists emerge as representatives because individuals assume extremism is representative, and protective, of their values and preferences (Palmer & Smardon, 1989). Group members and representatives establish extremist positions and pursue extremist agendas because they exaggerate the extremism of their constituency (Druckman, 1967). These processes exclude moderate, integrative positions from the political discourse and social debates.

Imagined extremism also undermines face-to-face negotiations. Negotiators assume their opponents' interests are hostile and antithetical to their own, commonly failing to perceive and build negotiations upon shared beliefs, goals, and interests (Thompson & Hrebec, in press). Negotiations in which ideological differences are made salient—a strategy representatives often resort to to rouse their constituents' passions and communicate unwavering commitment to principled positions—are especially likely to fail, even when ideological differences are irrelevant to the negotiations (Keltner & Robinson, 1993). Given partisans'

Table 1. *Revisionists' selections of authors to teach in an introductory English course and traditionalists' guesses of revisionists' selections*

	Revisionists' own selections		Traditionalists' guesses of revisionists' selections
(CM)	William Shakespeare	(AF)	Alice Walker
(HM)	Gabriel Garcia Marquez	(AF)	Maya Angelou
(CF)	Virginia Woolf	(AM)	James Baldwin
(CM)	Geoffrey Chaucer	(AM)	Frederick Douglass
(AsF)	Maxine Hong-Kingston	(CF)	Mary Wollstonecraft
(CM)	Sophocles	(AF)	Toni Morrison
(AF)	Toni Morrison	(CF)	Adrienne Rich
(CM)	Homer	(AsF)	Maxine Hong-Kingston
(CM)	Henry David Thoreau	(CF)	Kate Chopin
(CF)	Charlotte Brontë	(AF)	Zora Neale Hurston
(CM)	Herman Melville	(HM)	Gabriel Garcia Marquez
(CM)	James Joyce	(CF)	Virginia Woolf
(AM)	Frederick Douglass	(AM)	Richard Wright
(AM)	Richard Wright	(NM)	N. Scott Momaday
(CF)	Kate Chopin	(AF)	Linda Brent

Note. Authors are listed in order from the most frequently to the least frequently selected. Letters in bold refer to the gender and ethnicity of the author. **AF** = African-American female; **AM** = African-American male; **AsF** = Asian-American female; **CF** = Caucasian female; **CM** = Caucasian male; **HM** = Hispanic male; **NM** = Native American male.

initial misperceptions, one proven remedy is for negotiators to disclose their actual attitudes and identify common ground before negotiating (Keltner & Robinson, 1993). Negotiators are likely to resist this remedy, however, because they are more inclined to hold back information, dissemble, or not communicate with the opposition.

POWER, BIAS, AND EXTREMISM

In our studies, the tendency for partisans to exaggerate the magnitude of their conflict was qualified by two provocative asymmetries in social bias. First, across conflicts, a consistent *perceiver effect* emerged: Partisans in power exaggerated the magnitude of their conflict more than partisans seeking change. For example, traditionalists, more likely to be tenured males and guardians of the literary status quo, polarized the Western Canon dispute more than revisionists. Second, a consistent *target effect* emerged: Those partisans seeking change, such as pro-life partisans, were judged to be more extremist than their status quo counterparts by both sides to the dispute.

We are currently exploring the ways in which individuals in power are more biased but more accurately judged than those not in power, as well as the mechanisms that account for such asymmetries in social misperception. One between-group factor that is typically associated with power differences is numerical minority-majority status: Majority-group members tend to enjoy the benefits of power. Figure 3 presents the extent to which majority- and minority-group members over- or underestimated majority- and minority-group members' extremism in a recent study (Ebenbach & Keltner, 1995). Consistent with predictions, majority-group members were more prone to exagger-

ate the extremism of both sides, and minority-group members were perceived by both sides to be more extremist than majority-group members. We hypothesize that other power differences derived from group membership, such as those related to social class, political affiliation, age cohort, and occupational status, will predict similar asymmetries in perceivers' levels of bias and the perceived extremism of targets.

Power also accounts for asymmetries in social bias within groups. In a recent study, high- and low-status fraternity members judged each other's personalities and emotions following a teasing exercise (Keltner & Ebenbach, 1995). Again consistent with our prediction, high-status fraternity members judged the personalities and emotions of other members less accurately than low-status members, and high-status members' emotions were more accurately judged by both low- and high-status members.

Power is likely to lead partisans to be more biased judges, recent empirical evidence suggests, for several reasons. High-power individuals attend less carefully to other people's actions and beliefs and rely more readily on social stereotypes than do low-power individuals, who are more motivated to carefully attend to other people (Fiske, 1993). In contrast, people seeking change feel more negative emotion toward their conflict than do those in power, and negative emotion is known to motivate more careful, systematic judgment (Ebenbach & Keltner, 1995). Finally, personality data indicate that partisans in power tend to be more dominant and authoritarian than individuals seeking change, and these qualities predict increased bias and stereotypical thinking (Ebenbach & Keltner, 1995; Fiske, 1993).
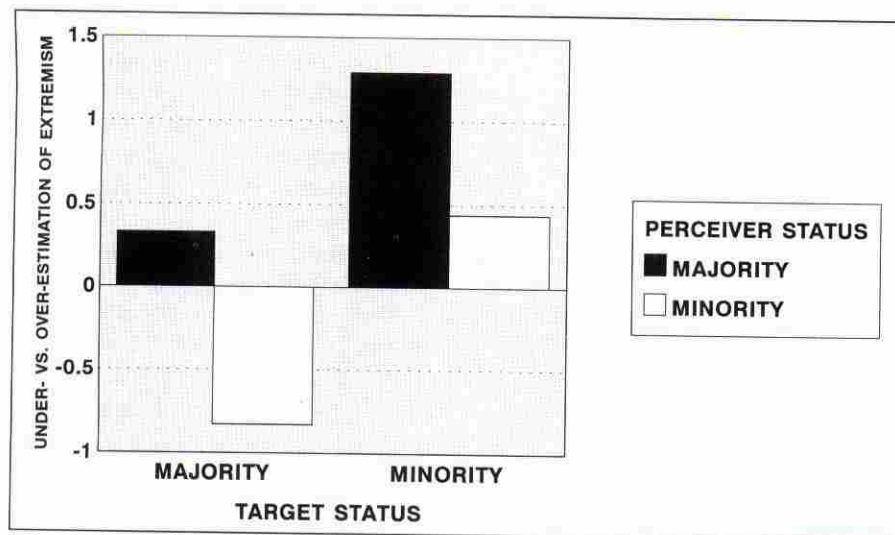
Evidence also points to two ac-

Fig. 3. Perceiver and target effects in perceptions of attitudes of majority- and minority-group partisans. The graph shows the degree to which majority- and minority-group members under- or overestimated the extremism of their own groups and their opponents.

counts of the target effects, whereby low-power partisans are judged less accurately than high-power partisans and in more extremist terms. First, more valid information is available about the attitudes of partisans in power, who represent the status quo, in large part because these partisans are likely to have greater access to the avenues by which group attitudes are disseminated. Second, partisans seeking change are most successful when they present their position in consistent and unwavering terms (Nemeth, 1986)—a rhetorical style that may contribute to the sense that change seekers are extremist.

CONCLUSIONS

In the past 40 years, researchers have sought to understand how social perception, and specifically images of the enemy, shapes the dynamics between groups in conflict. In keeping with this tradition, our research finds that partisans to ideological disputes exaggerate the magnitude of their conflict; their opponents' extremism, bias, and political motives; and their own side's extremism and bias. These prevalent beliefs about partisans and conflict influence the dynamics of group formation, decision making, face-to-face negotiations, and even levels of apathy and alienation in ways that further foment the extremism of social disputes.

Recent evidence linking power to social misperception suggests that researchers should now consider how group dynamics shape social perception. Across measures, conflicts, and definitions of power, individuals with power, derived from both their group association and their position within a group hierarchy, have been found to be more biased in their own judgments and more accurately judged by others than individuals without power. The attentional, emotional, and personality characteristics of individuals in positions of power and those seeking change differ, thus producing different levels of bias, which contrib-

ute to the character of social debates and the nature of social change.

Note

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