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Actual Versus Assumed Differences in Construal: "Naive Realism" in Intergroup Perception and Conflict

[Attitudes and Social Cognition]

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Abstract

We compared partisan group members' construals and beliefs regarding contentious issues, contrasting actual differences in construal with their assumptions about those differences. Study 1 dealt with the abortion debate and Study 2 with the racially charged Howard Beach incident. Although many significant examples of construal differences were found, *over* estimation of such differences was far more common than *under* estimation. Misperception about the extremity and consistency of conservatives was particularly pronounced. Partisans in both studies felt that their own views were less driven by political ideology than those of the other side or their own side. In Study 2, nonpartisans similarly overestimated liberal–conservative differences (again, especially for conservatives). This finding suggests the phenomenon is best characterized as a bias not in partisan perceptions but in the way partisans, and partisanship, are perceived.

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)

The recognition that human beings actively construe and even construct the phenomena they encounter, and the further recognition that the impact of any objective stimulus depends on the subjective meaning attached to it by the actor, have long been among psychology's most important intellectual contributions. As early as the 1930s, when objectivist behaviorism was dominating most of American psychology, European psychologists including Piaget and Bartlett were discussing the active role that schemas and other cognitive structures play in guiding the interpretation of information and creating individual differences in such interpretation. In the decades that followed, two of social psychology's most important intellectual leaders, Solomon Asch and Kurt Lewin, repeatedly emphasized the importance of attending to the *actor's* subjective understanding or “definition” of his or her situation. During that period, personality researchers and clinicians (most notably [George Kelly, 1955](#)) similarly stressed the importance of subjectivist considerations in understanding individual differences in behavior ([Ross, 1990](#); [Ross & Nisbett, 1991](#)).

Since the flowering of the cognitive tradition in social and personality psychology in the 1970s, it has become clear that there really are two separate insights to be gained about subjectivism. The first and more familiar insight is simply that subjective construal matters—that

in many contexts people's interpretations play an important role in determining their responses and that variability and uncertainty of construal contributes significantly to the variability and unpredictability of important classes of human behavior. The second and less familiar insight, captured in our opening quotation from Ichheiser, is that people tend to be “naive realists” (Griffin & Ross, 1991; Ross & Ward, *in press-a*). That is, people do not fully appreciate the subjective status of their own construals, and, as such, they do not make sufficient allowance for the uncertainties of construal when called on to make behavioral attributions and predictions about others (Griffin, Dunning, & Ross, 1990; Ross, 1990; Ross & Nisbett, 1991).

It is easy to imagine how blindness to intersubjective differences in construal might exacerbate misunderstanding, distrust, and dislike. Disputants may fail to recognize the extent to which their adversaries' judgments and decisions are predicated on different factual beliefs, ontological assumptions, or interpretations of relevant information. In other words, they may fail to recognize the extent to which their adversaries are essentially responding to a “different object of judgment” (Asch, 1940; Ichheiser, 1970), which in turn may lead them to see their adversaries as stubborn, illogical, or distorted by some combination of ideological bias and self-interest (Bar-Tal & Geva, 1986; Fisher & Ury, 1981).

In the context of social debate between relatively well-defined partisan factions, however, a subtler source of misattribution and antipathy may make its influence felt. The opposing partisans may be well aware (in fact, all members of the body politic may be well aware) that the two groups construe the world differently. They similarly may be aware that the construal differences in question tend to be congruent with the groups' differing ideological positions. However, these same partisans may attribute such construal differences to the biasing effects on others (but not, of course, on themselves) of ideology or self-interest. In other words, individuals may feel that whereas they themselves have proceeded from available evidence to reasonable interpretations and beliefs, those who hold opposing beliefs (and, to a lesser extent, even those who share their general ideological position) have done just the opposite, (i.e., that other people's construals of evidence, in contrast to their own, are the consequence rather than the cause of preexisting values and biases).

The result of such interpersonal perceptions and attributions should be not an underestimation of construal differences and ideological congruence but an overestimation. People should tend to believe that they alone struggle with the ambiguities, complexities, and even inconsistencies of objective reality, that others tend to perceive the world in simple, ideologically consistent, black or white terms, while they alone appreciate fully the subtler grays. Ironically, the intergroup consequences that follow from such an appreciation, or even exaggeration, of construal differences are apt to be as unfortunate as the consequences that follow from obliviousness to construal differences. That is, partisans involved in conflict may continue to see the other side as extreme, unreasonable, and unreachable, and to see their own side as similarly (albeit, somewhat less) extreme and biased. Partisans, accordingly, are apt to underestimate the possibility of finding common ground that could provide the basis for conciliation and constructive action; as a consequence, they could be reluctant to enter into the type of frank dialogue that could reveal such commonalities in interests or beliefs.

The two types of social perception bias we have identified may seem quite different and even contradictory (one involves obliviousness to construal differences, and the other involves anticipation or even exaggeration of such differences). However, both types of bias actually have a common theme, the one noted in our introductory quote from Ichheiser. This theme is prominent in research on “phenomenal absolutism” (Bar-Tal & Geva, 1986; Segall, Campbell, & Herskovitz, 1966) or, as we prefer to call it, *naive realism* (Griffin & Ross, 1991; Ross & Ward, *in press-a*),

and it has long been noted in research on in-group versus out-group attitudes ([Allport, 1954](#); [Brewer, 1979](#); [Sumner, 1906](#)). It speaks to the individual's unshakable conviction that he or she is somehow privy to an invariant, knowable, objective reality—a reality that others will also perceive faithfully, provided that they are reasonable and rational, a reality that others are apt to misperceive only to the extent that they (in contrast to oneself) view the world through a prism of self-interest, ideological bias, or personal perversity. Theorists and researchers concerned with intergroup conflict, in turn, have noted some of the potential social consequences of this naivete, including the tendency to misattribute the other side's words and deeds, to blame the other side exclusively for shared problems ([Blumenthal, Kahn, Andrews, & Head, 1972](#); [Eldridge, 1979](#)), to doubt their sincerity ([Deutsch, 1973](#); [Thomas & Pondy, 1977](#)), and to overlook opportunities for identifying commonalities in goals, values, and interests ([Fisher & Ury, 1981](#); [Keltner & Robinson, 1993](#); [Pruitt & Rubin, 1986](#); [Schelling, 1963](#)).

In two studies, we compared actual and perceived discrepancies in social construal. More specifically, we explored three separate questions prompted by our foregoing discussion of subjective construal and conflict. First, we examined the extent to which members of the opposing partisan groups actually did construe the various objects of their judgment differently, in accord with their differing political or ideological stances. Second, we tested the hypothesis that the group members—and perhaps nonpartisan neutrals as well—will tend to overestimate group extremity and ideological consistency and therefore overestimate intergroup differences. Finally, we examined the attributions or interpretations that the partisans place on whatever construal differences they perceive or assume to exist.

Our two studies concerned two different types of partisan dispute. Study 1 dealt with the general issue of abortion; Study 2 dealt with a specific incident of interracial violence. In both studies, college students holding opposing political views were asked to specify some of the factual assumptions and construals underlying those views. They were also asked to estimate the assumptions and construals of partisans on the other side and partisans on their own side as well. Both studies also addressed the attribution issue through various questionnaire items asking the antagonists to estimate the impact of objective or evidential factors versus subjective or ideological factors in determining such construals. The design of Study 2, however, added an important new feature. It included nonpartisan, or “neutral,” participants as well as ideological adversaries, thus allowing us to determine whether overestimation of partisan ideological congruence and extremity arises solely from the rater's own partisanship or, as we suspect, is actually a more general feature of social perception.

Study 1: Pro-Choice and Pro-Life Views of Partisanship in the Abortion Debate [↗](#)

In Study 1 we sought, through two separate questionnaire administrations, to examine the actual extent to which members of opposing partisan groups differed in the way that they construed the facts underlying the issue of abortion and the extent to which the group members believed that they differed. [1](#) The initial questionnaire dealt with the types of individuals, circumstances, and considerations that prompt abortion decisions. The follow-up questionnaire dealt both with matters of biology and medicine (in particular, the age at which a fetus becomes viable and the age of the fetus at the point when abortions are commonly performed) and with pragmatic considerations (i.e., the consequences likely to follow from enactment of particular laws and policies restricting the practice of abortion). Also, whereas the initial questionnaire used members of partisan organizations, the follow-up questionnaire used self-descriptions as a basis for respondent selection and characterization. Both questionnaires, however, asked the pro-

choice and pro-life advocates not only to specify their own construals and assumptions relevant to the abortion issue but also to estimate the views both of those on the other side in the abortion debate and of those on their own side. In the initial questionnaire, participants were also asked to assess the relative importance of various factors (some evidential, some pragmatic, and some philosophical or ideological) first in determining their own views and then in determining the views of the two opposing sides.

Method [↑](#)

Participants. [↑](#)

The initial questionnaire dealing with abortion was administered to 27 pro-choice and 25 pro-life participants recruited from relevant campus groups concerned with the issue. These participants were paid \$5.² The second questionnaire, on the same topic, was administered to students enrolled in an introductory psychology class, 66 of whom ultimately labeled themselves as strongly pro-choice and 22 of whom labeled themselves as strongly pro-life.³ These “partisans,” who constituted roughly 30% of the class, received credit toward a class requirement in lieu of payment.

Procedure. [↑](#)

The first part of the initial questionnaire featured six scenarios or vignettes that assessed the participants' assumptions and beliefs about the circumstances that lead to abortion. Each scenario dealt with a particular woman's decision to undergo an abortion. Three scenarios were designed to present relatively sympathetic cases. One involved a pregnancy resulting from rape; a second involved a pregnancy in which the fetus was at risk of a genetically transmitted disease; and a third scenario involved the pregnancy of a high school teenager. The other three scenarios were designed to present relatively less sympathetic cases. One dealt with a pregnancy resulting from a casual affair; one dealt with a pregnancy that posed a threat to career aspirations; and one dealt with the pregnancy of an older mother with grown children. Participants assessed both how much sympathy they felt for the individual deciding to undergo abortion in each case and how typical they found each of the abortion cases (1 = *not at all typical*, 7 = *extremely typical*). The respondents filling out the initial questionnaire subsequently were asked to estimate the percentage of all abortions that fell into each of several categories, again some relatively sympathetic (e.g., abortion following rape or incest) and some relatively less sympathetic (e.g., abortion to terminate a pregnancy following a casual affair).

Respondents to Questionnaire 1 were then asked about the bases for their opinions and beliefs about abortion. Specifically, they were asked to indicate (on 7-point scales) the extent they had been influenced by each of several stipulated factors, including actual cases they knew or had heard about; practical consequences of laws permitting or limiting abortion; religious, moral, or ethical considerations; general philosophical beliefs; and general political orientation. When participants had completed all of these ratings pertaining to their own construals and beliefs, they were again presented with the same set of items, but this time asked about the responses that would be made to each item by “typical pro-choice” and “typical pro-life” partisans at Stanford University.⁴

The questionnaire administered to the respondents who participated in the second phase of Study 1 further explored beliefs of pro-choice and pro-life partisans enrolled in an introductory psychology class. One set of questions dealt with pragmatic considerations. Participants assessed as true or false five statements about specific consequences that might follow if the courts

substantially restricted legal access to abortion through a decision overturning *Roe v. Wade*. Three of the consequences were negative (e.g., “more women would die because of illegal abortions”; “there would be more mistreated children”; and “only rich women would be able to get abortions”). Two of the stipulated consequences were positive or ameliorative (e.g., “there would be more widespread use of birth control”; and “most of the unwanted babies would be adopted”). For each item, participants first offered their own assessment, then estimated in turn the percentage of pro-choice and of pro-life supporters in their introductory psychology class who would respond *true* or *false* to each item. A second set of items dealt with factual or scientific matters, including, most notably, the percentage of early abortions (i.e., those occurring in the 10th week of pregnancy or before) and the week of pregnancy during which the fetus becomes viable. For each of these items, respondents again first offered their own numerical estimate and then guessed the estimate offered by their pro-choice and pro-life classmates.

Results [↑](#)

Sympathy for scenario characters choosing abortion. [↑](#)

Participants' sympathy ratings for the three relatively sympathetic and three relatively unsympathetic scenarios in the first questionnaire administration were combined to provide composite measures, as shown in [Table 1](#). As one might expect, pro-choice respondents expressed significantly more sympathy than pro-life respondents for the women choosing abortion. This was true for the “sympathetic” scenarios, $t(49) = 2.81, p < .01$, the “unsympathetic” scenarios, $t(49) = 5.62, p < .001$, and the six-scenario composite, $t(49) = 5.19, p < .001$. As predicted, however, this sympathy gap proved to be far smaller than the members of either the pro-choice, $t(49) = 3.46, p < .01$, for the composite measure, or the pro-life group, $t(49) = 3.10, p < .01$, for the composite measure, had presumed it to be (see [Table 1](#)). The source of this discrepancy between presumption and reality was clear. We found that pro-life respondents actually expressed significantly more sympathy for the women electing abortion than either the pro-choice participants, $t(50) = 2.41, p < .05$, or the pro-life participants themselves, $t(24) = 3.62, p < .01$, had presumed. We similarly found that the pro-choice respondents actually expressed less sympathy for these women than the pro-life respondents, $t(49) = 1.96, p < .06$, or the pro-choice respondents themselves, $t(25) = 3.49, p < .01$ had presumed.

Table 1
Actual Versus Estimated Differences in Assessments of Sympathetic and Unsympathetic Abortion Scenarios and Categories (Questionnaire 1)

Item	Actual ratings					Pro-choice estimates						Pro-life estimates					
	By PCs (n = 27)		By PLs (n = 25)		Difference ¹	Of PCs ²		Of PLs ²		Difference ³		Of PCs ²		Of PLs ²		Difference ³	
	M	SD	M	SD		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Sympathy for women in vignette:																	
Sympathetic scenarios	7.8	1.5	6.7	1.2	1.1**	8.1	1.3	5.9	1.9	2.2 ^a	2.2	8.4	1.1	5.2**	1.8	3.2 ^b	2.2
Unsympathetic scenarios	4.9	2.1	2.0	1.6	2.9*	5.6	1.9	1.2*	1.0	4.4 ^b	2.5	5.9	1.7	1.6	1.3	4.3*	2.1
All scenarios	6.3	1.6	4.3	1.1	2.0**	6.9**	1.5	3.6*	1.2	3.3 ^b	2.1	7.1	1.2	3.4**	3.4	3.7 ^b	1.9
Assessed typicality of unsympathetic- sympathetic scenarios (mean difference)	0.0	3.5	0.9	4.3	-0.9	0.4	4.2	4.4**	4.1	-4.0*	5.6	-0.5	3.4	1.9	4.7	-2.4	4.5
Estimated percentage of abortions in unsympathetic- sympathetic categories (mean difference)	5.9	6.1	9.3	6.7	-3.4	7.3	5.7	14.7**	5.7	-7.4	6.1	4.8	5.4	12.4**	6.3	-7.6	6.2

Note. PCs = pro-choice participants; PLs = pro-life participants.
¹ Asterisks indicate *actual* difference between groups significantly different from zero: * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.
² Asterisks indicate *estimated* rating significantly different from corresponding *actual* rating: * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.
³ Superscripts indicate *estimated* difference significantly greater than corresponding *actual* difference: * $p < .05$. ^b $p < .01$.

Table 1 Actual Versus Estimated Differences in Assessments of Sympathetic and Unsympathetic Abortion Scenarios and Categories (Questionnaire 1)

Perceived typicality of particular types of abortions. [↑](#)

Participants' estimates of typicality for the three relatively sympathetic scenarios were subtracted from their estimates for the three relatively unsympathetic scenarios. The resulting difference scores thus provided an index assessing participants' tendency to perceive unsympathetic abortion scenarios rather than sympathetic ones as typical; a higher score, accordingly, reflected a tendency to perceive the distribution of unsympathetic versus sympathetic abortion decisions in a manner ideologically congruent with the pro-life position rather than the pro-choice position. Respondents' percentage estimates for the frequency of cases in unsympathetic versus sympathetic abortion categories were treated similarly, again yielding difference scores for which more positive values were more reflective of biases congruent with the pro-life as opposed to the pro-choice stance (see [Table 1](#)).

Analyses of these composite measures revealed only a modest tendency for pro-life respondents to see unsympathetic abortion scenarios and categories as relatively more typical, and sympathetic scenarios and categories as relatively less typical, than did pro-choice respondents (see [Table 1](#)). This difference proved to be marginally statistically significant for the "category" measure, $t(50) = 1.94, p < .06$, but not for the "scenario" measure ($t < 1$). Once again, however, these differences proved to be smaller than the partisans themselves had assumed. In the case of the pro-choice raters, the relevant discrepancy between actual and perceived partisan differences reached the conventional significance level for the scenario measure, $t(49) = 2.37, p < .05$, and fell just short of that level for the category measure, $t(48) = 1.99, p < .06$. In the case of the pro-life raters, the discrepancies in question, although in the predicted direction, did not reach conventional significance levels for either measure.⁵

Further examination revealed that it was the ideological consistency of the pro-life faction that was most likely to be overestimated, again by pro-choice and pro-life partisans alike. For the scenario measure, the degree of overestimation regarding pro-life participants was significant for pro-choice estimators, $t(50) = 3.04, p < .01$, but not for pro-life estimators, $t(24) = 1.03, ns$; for

the category measure, the degree of overestimation regarding pro-life respondents was significant both for pro-choice estimators, $t(48) = 3.07, p < .01$, and for the pro-life estimators themselves, $t(24) = 4.43, p < .001$.

Perception of medical and scientific facts. [↑](#)

Participants responding to the follow-up questionnaire in Study 1 were asked their beliefs about two factual or scientific matters of obvious concern to partisans in the abortion debate: (a) the percentage of abortions performed before or during the 10th week of pregnancy (i.e., the relative commonness of early, and therefore ethically less troubling, abortions) and (b) the week of pregnancy during which the fetus becomes viable.

The participants' responses to these items revealed modest differences between the factual assumptions of pro-choice and pro-life partisans, which was statistically significant in the case of the early abortion item, $t(82) = 2.03, p < .05$, but nonsignificant in the case of the week-of-viability item, $t(75) = 1.23$. As predicted, both of the “real” differences were smaller than the differences assumed by the two partisan groups. Specifically, pro-choice raters significantly overestimated pro-choice/pro-life differences on both the early abortion item, $t(61) = 2.40, p < .05$, and the viability item, $t(58) = 2.24, p < .01$.⁶ For pro-life raters, the discrepancy between actual and estimated pro-choice/pro-life differences was marginally significant for the early abortion item, $t(19) = 2.08, p < .06$, and nonsignificant for the viability item, $t(17) = 1.15$.

Assumed consequences of limiting access to abortion. [↑](#)

The items in the second questionnaire that dealt with anticipated harmful versus benign consequences of more restrictive abortion policies revealed several substantial differences between the views of the two partisan groups (see [Table 2](#)). Pro-choice participants were unanimous in agreeing that more deaths from illegal abortion would occur. They were close to unanimous in agreeing that more babies would be mistreated. In addition, almost half believed that abortion access would be restricted to the rich. (The mean percentage of agreement over the three items was roughly 79%.) Pro-life advocates were less convinced about each of these harmful consequences (the mean percentage of agreement was roughly 59%). Disagreements pertaining to the two items dealing with benign or mitigating consequences were even more pronounced. Whereas nearly 73% of pro-life partisans expected more widespread use of birth control, only 44% of pro-choice partisans agreed. Similarly, although 57% of pro-life partisans expected that “most unwanted babies would be adopted,” the corresponding percentage for the pro-choice partisans was only 12%.

Table 2
Mean Actual Versus Estimated Differences in Factual Beliefs and Construal Pertinent to the Abortion Issue (Questionnaire 2)

Item	Actual ratings					Pro-choice estimates						Pro-life estimates					
	By PCs (n = 27)		By PLs (n = 25)		Difference ¹	Of PCs ²		Of PLs ²		Difference ²		Of PCs ²		Of PLs ²		Difference ²	
	M	SD	M	SD		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Factual beliefs																	
% of Early abortions	65.9	24.1	53.4	24.3	12.5*	68.2	21.7	49.0	23.7	19.2*	21.9	68.4	23.7	46.8	19.2	21.6	19.6
Week fetus viable	21.6	7.8	18.8	10.0	2.8	22.8	8.4	15.6*	11.1	7.2 ^b	9.3	22.3	9.8	16.8	9.4	5.5	9.9
Consequences of abortion restrictions:																	
Negative consequences⁴																	
More deaths from illegal abortions	100.0		81.8		18.2** ^a	85.9**		24.7**		61.2 ^b		82.3**		40.8**		41.6 ^b	
More mistreated babies	89.4		59.1		30.3** ^a	70.4**		24.1**		46.3 ^b		62.0**		31.3**		30.7	
Access restricted to the rich	46.1		36.4		9.7	54.4*		25.6**		28.8 ^b		55.3		37.5		17.8	
Combined ³	78.5		59.1		19.4	70.2		24.8		45.4		66.5		36.5		30.0	
Benign consequences⁴																	
More widespread use of birth control	44.0		72.7		-28.7*	40.1		61.0**		-20.9		46.6		64.0*		-17.4	
Most unwanted babies adopted	12.1		57.1		-45.0**	27.4**		70.8**		-43.4		28.3**		63.7		-35.4	
Combined ³	28.1		64.9		-36.8	33.8		65.9		-32.2		37.5		63.9		-26.4	

Note. PCs = pro-choice participants; PLs = pro-life participants.
¹ Asterisks indicate *actual difference* between groups significantly different from zero. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.
² Asterisks indicate *estimated rating* significantly different from corresponding *actual rating*. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.
³ Superscripts indicate *estimated difference* significantly different from corresponding *actual difference*. * $p < .05$. ^b $p < .01$.
⁴ Means represent actual and estimated percentages of respondents agreeing that the stated consequences of abortion restrictions will occur.
⁵ These combined measures represent the average of the percentages for the individual item listed above them. Although useful for summary and illustrative purposes, discrepancies between actual and estimated differences for these combined measures cannot be compared via standard *t* tests.
⁶ By Fisher's exact test.

Table 2 Mean Actual Versus Estimated Differences in Facial Beliefs and Construal Pertinent to the Abortion Issue (Questionnaire 2)

For the three items that dealt with the anticipated negative consequences of increased abortion restrictions (i.e., “more deaths from illegal abortions,” “more mistreated babies,” and “abortion access restricted to the rich”), pro-choice estimators consistently overestimated partisan group differences (all $ps < .01$), believing in particular that pro-life respondents would respond in a more ideologically congruent fashion than they actually did. Pro-life raters also significantly overestimated their own group's tendency to respond in a manner consistent with ideology on two of the three items (i.e., the death and mistreatment items), but on those same two items they actually significantly underestimated pro-choice extremity (as did the pro-choice raters themselves). Pro-life perceptions were generally accurate for both partisan groups on the third “negative” item (“abortion access restricted to the rich”). Contrary to our predictions, the gap in assumptions regarding potential benign or positive consequences actually was slightly (albeit never significantly) larger than either partisan group had predicted.

Bases of beliefs. [↑](#)

The first questionnaire asked respondents to assess the bases both of their own abortion stance and that of typical partisans on the two sides of the issue. Specifically, they were asked to estimate (using 7-point scales) the impact exerted by six specific factors including both objective or pragmatic considerations (e.g., knowledge of actual cases or anticipated consequences of changing the laws) and ideological considerations (e.g., political orientation and religious or ethical concerns). The results of these assessments (see [Table 3](#)) are revealing. Both pro-choice and pro-life partisans cited “general philosophical beliefs” as the most important determinant of their own views, with mean ratings of 5.8 and 5.6, respectively, on the relevant 7-point scale. Both claimed that they personally had been moderately influenced both by knowledge of actual cases and by the presumed consequences of laws permitting freer access to abortion. The groups

differed primarily in their assessment of the impact of “genuine religious, moral, and ethical considerations” (pro-life respondents claimed to have been more influenced by these considerations than did pro-choice respondents, but not significantly so) and the impact both of “general political orientation” and the “anticipated consequences of laws restricting abortion” (pro-choice respondents claimed to have been more influenced by both types of considerations than pro-life participants claimed).

Table 3
Basis of Abortion Views: Mean Assessed Impact of Various Factors on Own Views, on Views of Own Side, and on Views of Other Side

Item	Rated influence on self					Rated influence on pro-choice				Rated influence on pro-life			
	By PCs (n = 26)		By PLs (n = 25)		Difference ¹	By PCs ²		By PLs ²		By PCs ²		By PLs ²	
	M	SD	M	SD		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Knowledge of actual cases	3.5	1.8	3.4	1.7	0.1	4.4*	1.3	5.5**	0.9	3.6	1.5	4.2*	1.3
Anticipated consequences of laws restricting abortion	4.8	1.8	3.6	1.7	1.2*	5.4*	1.2	5.5	1.1	2.3**	1.3	3.7	1.7
Anticipated consequences of laws permitting abortion	4.1	1.9	4.1	2.0	0.0	4.4	1.5	4.8	1.4	4.5	2.0	4.8	1.6
General philosophical beliefs	5.8	1.1	5.6	1.1	0.2	5.7	0.9	5.5	1.4	5.7	1.3	5.8	1.1
General political orientation	3.8	2.1	2.2	1.5	1.6**	4.3	1.5	5.1*	1.0	4.6**	1.6	4.4**	1.5
Religious, moral, ethical convictions	4.6	1.8	5.5	1.8	-0.9	4.4	1.2	3.7*	1.2	6.3	0.6	6.1	0.7

Note. PCs = pro-choice respondents; PLs = pro-life respondents.
¹ Asterisks indicate *actual difference* between groups in ratings of influence on self significantly different from zero. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.
² Asterisks indicate rated influence on an average group member significantly different from corresponding rating for influence on self. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 3 Basis of Abortion Views: Mean Assessed Impact of Various Factors on Own Views, on Views of Own Side, and on Views of Other

When we looked at the partisans' beliefs about the bases of each other's views, some interesting differences in perception emerged. Thus, pro-choice respondents believed that their fellow pro-choice partisans had been heavily influenced by their concerns about the potential impact of more restrictive abortion laws but that their pro-life antagonists had been largely unmoved by such pragmatic concerns. The roughly 3-point difference in question was significantly greater than the 1.2-point difference apparent in the participants' self-reports regarding this consideration, $t(50) = 4.25$, $p < .01$, and, incidentally, greater than the 1.8-point difference expected by pro-life participants, which itself did not differ significantly from the actual difference. At the same time, both groups seemed to exaggerate pro-choice versus pro-life differences regarding the impact of religious, moral, and ethical convictions, $t_s(50) = 2.00$ and 2.57 , $p_s < .06$ and $.05$, for pro-choice and pro-life perceivers, respectively. The findings most relevant to our naive realism thesis, however, are those that involved assessments about the influence of ideology or politics. Our respondents felt that they personally had been less heavily influenced by their political orientation than had either their peers or their adversaries. The data in Table 3 make it clear that our participants were willing to admit that their own views on abortion had been influenced by nonfactual, nonpragmatic concerns, but they preferred to label such influences as philosophical or even religious and ethical. Only in taking into account the views of other people, especially the other side, were they inclined to cite the potentially biasing effect of political orientation.

Study 2: Liberals and Conservatives Interpret an Incident of Racial Violence [↗](#)

Study 1 dealt with actual versus estimated differences in construal relevant to a broad social issue, namely, the practice of abortion. In Study 2, the emphasis shifted somewhat. We sought to examine the extent to which opposing partisans—this time, self-described liberals and conservatives—would similarly overestimate differences in their construals of the facts surrounding one specific controversial incident, an incident involving interracial violence.

Racial animosity between Blacks and Whites remains an important problem in America, one that generally leads liberals and conservatives not only to offer rather different analyses of the nation's problems and to propose rather different solutions, but also to construe specific events that they hear or read about in a rather different fashion. One such event, the so-called “Howard Beach” incident, involved the death, in November 1986, of a young Black man, Michael Griffith, who was struck by a passing car as he attempted to escape from a group of White pursuers in the Howard Beach neighborhood of New York City. The incident ultimately led to the trial and conviction of some (but not all) of the young man's pursuers. Many details of the case remain ambiguous and highly controversial and as such offered an ideal target for our study of real versus perceived construal biases. Thus, in accord with our theoretical concerns, we first contrasted liberal and conservative construals and then explored the two groups' assumptions about the other side's construals versus their own side's construals.

In Study 2 we also asked a group of self-described political neutrals to predict the construals of both liberals and conservatives. The tendency for partisan respondents in Study 1 to overestimate the ideological consistency and extremity not only of the other side but of their own side as well suggested that the phenomenon in question had less to do with the way in which partisans perceive groups than the way in which partisan groups are perceived. Accordingly, and consistent with our conceptual analysis of naive realism, we expected that political middle-of-the-roads, or “neutrals,” like the political partisans themselves, would overestimate the construal biases and ideological consistency of both partisan groups.

There was also a change in the way we identified the target of the participants' various assessments. Rather than asking them to make assessments about the “typical” member of the partisan faction at Stanford, we asked them to estimate the mean responses of those of their classmates who had checked the two most extreme points on the relevant self-description item. In other words, we relied on an accurate and precise “operational” definition of the groups whose responses were to be estimated.

Method [↑](#)

Item preparation. [↑](#)

Item selection in this study depended heavily on the contribution of a group of student raters. These raters were provided with a large number of statements about the Howard Beach case, obtained from The New York Times and other newspapers, which they were asked to classify into three categories: (a) statements that reflected poorly on the White perpetrators of the assault (who became the defendants in the ensuing trial), (b) statements that reflected poorly on the Black victim in the case, and (c) statements that were relevant to the case but did not reflect poorly or well on any party in the case. From this larger pool of items, 14 were chosen that had elicited widespread agreement from the raters. Of these, 6 were “anti-perpetrator” items (e.g., “the White pursuers [the perpetrators] deliberately chased Michael Griffith [the victim] into the path of oncoming traffic”); 6 were “anti-victim” items (e.g., “Michael Griffith had consumed cocaine on the night in question”); and 2 were neutral, or “buffer,” items (e.g., “The Howard Beach incident damaged New York City's reputation”).

Participants. [↑](#)

A political preference question was administered to Stanford undergraduates who either were enrolled in introductory psychology classes or were recruited in their dormitories. The questionnaire results allowed us to identify and recruit 23 liberals and 20 conservatives, all of whom had characterized themselves using the most extreme points (i.e., 1 or 7) or next to most extreme points (i.e., 2 or 6) on the relevant 7-point liberal–conservative rating scale. Another 16 neutral or middle-of-the-road students, all of whom had characterized themselves using the middle of the scale (i.e., 4), were also identified and recruited. Participants received either course credit or a payment of \$5 for their participation.

Procedure. [↑](#)

All participants, political partisans and neutrals alike, were given the same one-page synopsis of the Howard Beach case (i.e., a description of the events leading up to the death of Michael Griffith, along with a summary of the jail sentences handed down) and were asked to complete a questionnaire that presented them with the 14 prepared statements about the case. Respondents were asked to indicate, using 7-point Likert-type scales, the degree to which they believed each statement to be true. They were also asked to predict how liberal and conservative undergraduates would rate the truth of the same statements (order of rating tasks was counterbalanced in the design). In all cases respondents were provided with an operational definition of liberals and conservatives; that is, they were told (accurately) that the terms *liberal* and *conservative* referred to those participants in our study who had characterized themselves using either the two most extreme or the two next-to-most extreme points on the relevant 7-point self-rating scale.

After completing all assessments pertaining to these 14 rater-generated construal items, participants read one-page summaries of the defense and prosecution closing trial statements and responded to several additional items created by us. The topics dealt with in these items included the accuracy of the defense and prosecution statements, the “harshness” of the defendants’ treatment, and the treatment the defendants likely would have received had the racial situation been reversed (i.e., if the defendants had been Black and the victim White). Once again, for each of the items, respondents both provided their own ratings and estimated the mean ratings that liberal and conservative respondents would offer for that item.⁷ Finally, as in Study 1, respondents were again asked to indicate the bases for their own assessments and those of the two partisan groups. However this time, instead of judging the basis of a stance on a general topic such as abortion, respondents were asked to characterize the bases for the judgments made in the Howard Beach case. Participants considered the impact of the available evidence and the impact of political ideology or beliefs, as well as the impact of their knowledge about the racial situation in New York. Furthermore, for these items dealing with influences on other people, participants were asked to report not only the influences they believed had actually determined the partisans’ responses but also the influences they expected the relevant partisan groups to report.

Results [↑](#)

Construal measures and predictions. [↑](#)

Composite scores were calculated for each respondent using the 12 items deemed sensitive to potentially liberal or conservative biases in construal.⁸ These scores were then transformed to percentage scores, such that 0 indicated the most extreme anti-victim bias possible and 100

indicated the most extreme anti-perpetrator bias possible. A one-way analysis of variance performed on these scores revealed a significant difference among the three groups' construals, $F(2, 56) = 6.27, p < .01$. More specifically, a focused contrast indicated a statistically significant, $t(41) = 3.14, p < .01$, but seemingly modest difference (i.e., 9 points on the relevant 100-point scale) between liberal and conservative construals (see Table 4). That is, liberal participants, as one might anticipate, interpreted the events in question in a way that reflected slightly more negatively on the White perpetrators (and less negatively on the Black victim) than did conservative respondents ($M_s = 63.2$ for liberals vs. 54.2 for conservatives). The neutrals, as one might also anticipate, offered construals that fell in between those of the two partisan groups ($M = 55.6$), although they were much closer to those of the conservatives.

Table 4
Actual Versus Estimated Liberal-conservative Differences in Mean Judgments and Construals Concerning the Howard Beach Case

Item	Participants' construal ⁴	Prosecution close ⁵	Defense close ⁵	Difference	Court treatment ⁶	Treatment if race reversed ⁶
Actual ratings						
By LIBS ($n = 23$)	63.2	71.8	19.0	52.9	3.2	1.5
By CONS ($n = 20$)	54.2	57.1	47.8	9.3	2.8	2.1
Difference ¹	8.9**	14.7*	-28.8**	43.6**	0.4	-0.6*
Estimates by LIBS²						
Of LIBS	68.9*	81.2**	22.3	58.9	3.6*	1.5
Of CONS	32.3**	33.1**	70.2**	-37.1**	2.0**	2.6*
Difference ³	36.5 ^b	48.1 ^b	-48.0 ^a	96.0 ^b	1.6 ^b	-1.1
Estimates by CONS²						
Of LIBS	72.9**	80.5	18.9	61.5	4.1**	1.4
Of CONS	36.8**	40.6**	68.2**	-27.6**	2.2*	2.9**
Difference ³	36.0 ^b	39.9 ^b	-49.3 ^a	89.2 ^b	1.9 ^b	-1.5 ^b
Estimates by NEUTS²						
Of LIBS	74.1**	80.9	24.8	56.1	3.9	1.4
Of CONS	33.3**	35.4**	65.2*	-29.9**	2.3	2.9**
Difference ³	40.8 ^b	45.6 ^b	-40.4	86.0 ^a	1.6 ^a	-1.4 ^a

Note. LIBS = liberals; CONS = conservatives; NEUTS = neutrals.
¹ Asterisks indicate actual difference significantly different from zero. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.
² Asterisks indicate estimated rating significantly different from corresponding actual ratings. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.
³ Superscripts indicate estimated difference significantly greater than corresponding actual difference. ^a $p < .05$. ^b $p < .01$.
⁴ Higher mean scores reflect construals of events hostile to the White perpetrators and favorable to the Black victim.
⁵ Means reflect participants' perceptions of accuracy (i.e., higher scores indicate greater perceived accuracy).
⁶ Means are based on 5-point scale (1 = far too harsh, 5 = far too lenient).

Table 4 Actual Versus Estimated Liberal-conservative Differences in Mean Judgments and Construals Concerning the Howard Beach Case

The most striking result, however, and the one most relevant to our research hypothesis, was the overestimation of this difference by partisans and nonpartisans alike. The primary source of this overestimation can be seen in Table 4 and Figure 1. That is, all three groups of respondents significantly overestimated the extent to which the conservatives would interpret the Howard Beach events in ways that blamed the Black victim and exonerated the White perpetrators, $t(41) = 6.04, p < .001$, for liberals; $t(19) = 6.37, p < .001$, for conservatives; $t(33) = 5.38, p < .001$, for neutrals. In addition, although to a lesser extent, all three groups overestimated the tendency for liberal participants to show an opposite (i.e., anti-perpetrator) bias, $t(22) = 2.73, p < .05$, for liberals; $t(41) = 3.63, p < .001$, for conservatives; and $t(365) = 3.10, p < .01$, for neutrals. The result, of course, was highly significant overestimation of liberal-conservative differences in

construal by all three groups of raters ($ps < .01$ in each case).⁹

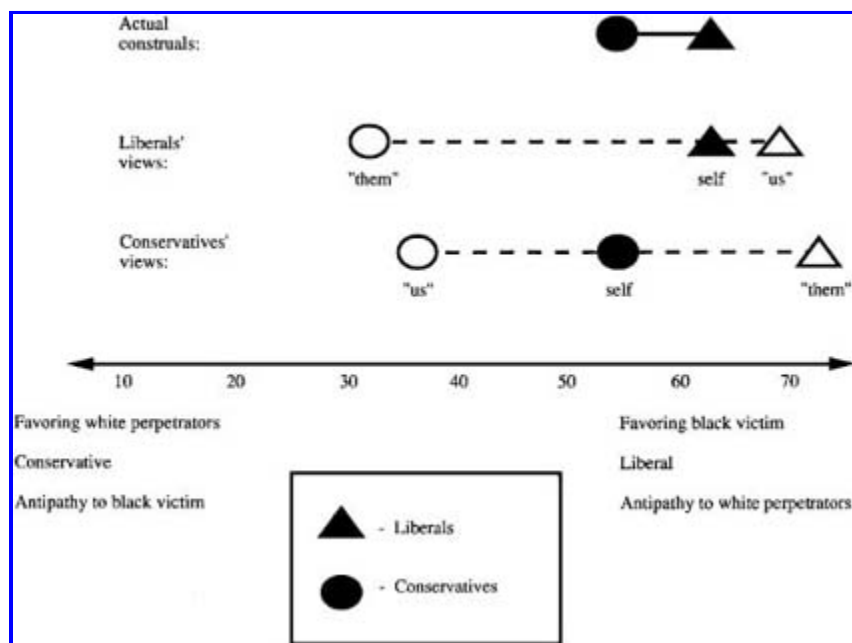


Figure 1. Actual and perceived differences between politically liberal and conservative participants in their interpretations of the Howard Beach incident.

The consistency of such overestimates bears further examination and emphasis. Not one of the 20 conservative participants showed the degree of pro-perpetrator bias that the liberals, the neutrals, or even the conservatives themselves expected to be average for such respondents. By the same token, only 3 of the 23 liberal respondents displayed the degree of anti-perpetrator bias predicted to be average for the group by conservatives, only 2 displayed the degree predicted to be average by the neutrals, and only 7 displayed the degree that the liberals themselves had predicted to be average for their peers.

Assessment of prosecution and defense closing statements.¹⁰

The liberal and conservative respondents' assessments of the relative accuracy of prosecution and defense closing statements in the Howard Beach case showed differences consistent both with their general political stance and with their differing interpretations and construals of the specific events that had occurred (see Table 4). Respectively, liberals gave somewhat higher mean ratings to the prosecution closing statements than did conservatives ($M_s = 71.8$ vs. 57.1 on the 100-point scale), $t(41) = 2.24$, $p < .04$, and they gave substantially lower ratings to the defense closing statements ($M_s = 19.0$ vs. 47.8), $t(41) = 5.06$, $p < .001$. Once again, however, these actual differences of 14.7 and 28.8 points, respectively, although statistically significant, were dwarfed by the magnitude of the differences that the three groups had predicted (i.e., roughly 40 points or more in every instance). As Table 4 indicates, the relevant overestimations of liberal-conservative differences by all three groups were statistically significant for the prosecution closing (and prosecution vs. defense closing) ratings. For ratings of the defense closing, only the liberal-conservative difference predicted by neutral participants failed to differ significantly from the actual difference.

Again, it was predictions about the conservative raters that proved to be the most discrepant

from the actual state of affairs. The discrepancy between actual and estimated conservative assessments, with respect to both the defense and prosecution closings, was statistically significant not only for liberal raters but also for neutral raters and for the conservatives themselves (with t tests all yielding probability values less than .01). By contrast, predictions about liberals were generally accurate. Liberals and neutrals slightly (but nonsignificantly) underestimated the ideologically consistent disapproval liberals would show in rating the defense closing, whereas conservative raters were right on target. Similarly, although all three groups overestimated the positivity of the liberal response to the prosecution closing, only the discrepancy between liberals' own estimates and their self-ratings attained a conventional level of significance (i.e., $p < .01$ for liberal raters, $p > .10$ for neutral and conservative raters).

Treatment of the defendants. ↗

Despite their general political stance, liberals and conservatives actually differed little (see [Table 4](#)) in assessing the leniency or severity of the treatment afforded the defendants by the court ($p > .15$). On the other hand, they did differ significantly (in the direction one might expect in light of their political stances) in their ratings about the harshness of the treatment the defendants would have received if the racial status of the White perpetrators and Black victim had been reversed, $t(41) = 2.14$, $p < .04$. Most important, however, when we went from actual to perceived differences, the now-familiar pattern emerged. On both the court treatment and racial reversal items, all three groups expected greater differences between liberal and conservative assessments than those actually found, with the discrepancy between actual and perceived differences reaching the conventional statistical significance level in every case (all $ps < .02$), except liberal raters' estimation of partisan differences on the racial reversal item ($p < .10$).

Once again, the gap between expectation and reality on these measures was primarily attributable to the overestimation, by all groups, of the degree to which conservative respondents would respond in an ideologically congruent fashion. On the racial reversal question, this overestimation was statistically significant for all three groups ($ps < .02$). On the court treatment issue, the overestimation was significant for the liberals and conservatives (both p values $< .01$), although it just failed to reach the conventional significance level for the neutrals, $t(34) = 1.99$, $p < .06$. Liberals were also misperceived, but less consistently so. Although their liberal bent on the court treatment question was overestimated to a statistically significant degree by conservatives, $t(41) = 3.39$, $p < .01$, and fellow liberals, $t(22) = 2.75$, $p < .02$, it was overestimated only marginally by neutrals, $t(37) = 1.89$, $p < .07$. On the racial reversal question, there was no evidence of such overestimation vis-à-vis liberals by any of the three groups.

Perceived bases for judgments. ↗

Participants were asked to rate the extent to which the various ratings and judgments reflecting construals of the Howard Beach case (both their own construals and those of the two partisan groups) had been influenced by three different factors: (a) the available evidence, (b) the participants' political ideology or beliefs, and (c) the participants' knowledge about the racial situation in New York. Respondents were asked not only to predict the extent to which liberals and conservatives would report having been influenced by each of these factors but also the extent to which these two groups really had been influenced.

Our analyses indicated that liberals and conservatives differed little in their claims about the influence exerted on their own assessments by either the available evidence or their political ideology. (Liberals did, however, report a significantly greater influence of their knowledge about New York's racial situation than did either of the other groups. Consistent with our account

of “naive realism,” however, participants across the political spectrum felt that other people, that is, both liberals and conservatives (in contrast to themselves), had been heavily influenced by ideology and relatively uninfluenced by evidence (see Table 5). Participants in all three groups further felt that liberals and conservatives alike had been influenced by ideology to an extent that was greater than those partisans had claimed (in all but one case, the relevant probability values reached the .01 level). Liberals and neutrals alike (and to some extent even the conservatives themselves) also felt that conservatives had been influenced less than they claimed by evidence ($ps < .01$ for liberal and neutral raters, $p < .10$ for conservative raters). Also, conservatives ($p < .07$), neutrals ($p < .01$), and even liberals ($p < .02$) felt the same way about the actual versus self-reported influence of evidence on liberals.

Table 5
Basis of Judgments and Construals: Mean Assessed Impact of Three Factors on Own Construal, on Own Construals of Own Side, and on Construals of Other Side

Item	Rated influence on self					Rated influence on liberals						Rated influence on conservatives					
	By LIBS (<i>n</i> = 23)		By CONS (<i>n</i> = 20)		Difference	By LIBS ¹		By CONS ¹		By NEUTS ¹		By LIBS ¹		By CONS ¹		By NEUTS ¹	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Available evidence	4.7	1.4	5.2	1.3	-0.5	4.0*	1.4	3.9	1.3	3.4**	1.3	3.7**	1.5	4.5	1.5	3.7**	1.4
Political ideology or beliefs	4.2	1.7	3.7	1.4	0.5	5.1**	1.3	5.7**	1.1	5.5*	1.2	5.5**	1.3	5.4**	1.3	5.6**	0.9
Racial knowledge	4.6	1.6	3.4	1.8	1.2	5.1	1.1	5.5*	1.1	5.2	1.4	3.9	1.7	4.1	1.4	3.7	1.1

Note: LIBS = liberals; CONS = conservatives; NEUTS = neutrals.
¹ Asterisks indicate rated actual influence on an average group member significantly different from corresponding actual rating for influence on self.
 * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 5 Basis of Judgments and Construals: Mean Assessed Impact of Three Factors on Own Construal, on Own Construals of Own Side, and on Construals of Other Side

Discussion [+](#)

Despite the changes in topic, groups, definitions, and the wording or emphasis of questionnaire items, the results of Study 2 closely resembled those of Study 1. Liberals and conservatives apparently interpreted the facts of the Howard Beach incident and ensuing trial somewhat differently, in accord with their ideological biases; however, as was the case with the pro-choice versus pro-life views explored in Study 1, the magnitude of these real construal differences was far exceeded by the magnitude of the differences assumed by the relevant partisans. Also, participants in Study 2 again overestimated the extremity and ideological consistency not only of the other side but of their own side as well. An asymmetry in these effects, noted somewhat parenthetically in Study 1, was once again apparent, however. Specifically, the overestimation proved to be much greater with respect to conservative views than with respect to liberal views (just as it had with respect to presumably more conservative pro-life views than presumably more liberal pro-choice views). As a result, whereas both partisan groups were about equally guilty of overestimating the gap in construals, liberals proved to be less accurate than conservatives in their perceptions of their adversaries, whereas conservatives proved to be less accurate than liberals in their perceptions of their peers.

Two findings of theoretical importance are also worth emphasizing. First, the neutral participants in Study 2 shared the tendency to overestimate both partisan ideological extremity and group differences in construal. This finding, along with the fact that partisan respondents in both studies tended to overestimate the extremity of the views of their own side as well as those of their ideological adversaries, indicates that partisanship on the part of the respondent making the relevant estimates was not the key to such overestimation. Rather, the data strongly suggest

the key was all participants' shared (but exaggerated) notions about the impact that partisanship would exert on construals and beliefs. Second, the results of Study 2 also provided further evidence relevant to our theoretical contentions regarding naive realism. That is, although members of the two partisan groups differed little in characterizing the bases of their own assessment, they clearly believed that other people in general, and people on the other side in particular, had been much more influenced than they themselves by political ideology and somewhat less influenced by the available evidence.

General Discussion

Results of our two studies suggest that partisans involved in social–political conflicts tend to overestimate the extremity and ideological congruency of the underlying beliefs and construal of the other side, and often of their own side as well. Critically, nonpartisans or neutrals similarly tend to overestimate the polarization of partisan views. Thus, partisans and nonpartisans alike are prone to overestimate the gap between the two sides, the gap between their own personal views and those of the other side, and especially the gap between their ideological partners and those of their ideological adversaries. The evidence further suggests that the partisans in our studies believed that their own views and assumptions were generally less shaped by political ideology than by objective or rational pragmatic concerns compared with the views of their adversaries or even their fellow partisans. These findings are highly compatible with and closely akin to the polarization effects documented by [Moscovici \(1981\)](#); see also [Judd & Kulik, 1980](#); [Pratkanis, 1989](#)). Our results, however, also extend those findings by demonstrating that it is erroneous and exaggerated inferences about the way partisans perceive the world, rather than partisan biases on perception, that lie at the heart of the phenomena we have reported.

Perhaps most surprising was the extent to which our respondents believed that their own side would be guilty of the same biases attributed to the other side. In both studies participants assumed that even those who shared their basic positions would not share their willingness to see relevant factual issues or pragmatic concerns in an objective rather than ideologically dictated fashion. Thus, in contrast to various discussions of stereotyping, particularly the typical in-group favoritism noted in accounts of ethnocentrism ([Brewer, 1979](#)) and out-group delegitimization ([Bartall, 1990](#)), partisans in our studies tended to view not only the other side but also the members of their own side as extremist and unduly influenced by ideology and bias. In effect, partisans within ideological groups tended to view themselves as atypical vis-à-vis their group: atypical in their moderation, in their freedom from bias, and in their capacity to “see things as they are in reality” even when that reality proves to be ideologically inconvenient or “politically incorrect.”

Another noteworthy, perhaps surprising, feature in our data may be the tendency for those holding the conservative position on the relevant issue to be perceived less accurately than those holding the liberal position, a tendency shared by liberals, by neutrals, and by conservatives themselves. It is conceivable that this result is an artifact arising from the distribution of political views on the predominantly liberal Stanford campus (i.e., Stanford liberals may in fact more closely resemble commonly held stereotypes than do conservatives). It is also possible that the term *liberal* (at least on the Stanford campus) may be relatively well understood and agreed on, whereas the label conservative may produce less agreement and may cover a broader range of political ideologies, (i.e., libertarian, traditionalist, authoritarian, etc.). In short, it remains to be seen whether this result reflects some more widespread and noteworthy phenomenon about the actual nature of, beliefs about, and misperceptions about the two groups (see [Fields & Schuman, 1976](#)). Obviously, broader, more representative sampling of liberal and conservative respondents (and, of course, issues) will be required before hazarding any guesses about the robustness, much

less the sources, of such a phenomenon.[10](#)

Before discussing possible theoretical or practical implications of our findings, we note some methodological limitations arising from the nature of our respondent sample. First, the sample was small, a problem that reduced the statistical power of any comparisons that obliged us to estimate rather than stipulate the actual differences to which predicted differences could be compared. Second, it is conceivable that our undergraduate partisans generally are more moderate and less doctrinaire than those holding the relevant political positions within the larger society; it is also conceivable (although less likely) that our partisans were less well informed than citizens in general about the views of their adversaries. These concerns should, at the least, make us reluctant to generalize too readily to the broader body politic.

A subtler but more serious problem concerns the task faced by our participants. Although we went to considerable pains to emphasize that they were to estimate average responses, or percentages of partisans opting for one response or another, we cannot rule out the possibility that some of our respondents nevertheless insisted on estimating “prototypical” responses (i.e., those most “exemplary” or “distinguishing” of the group) instead of, as we had specified, responses of “average or typical group members” (Study 1) or “the mean response” of all participants checking the appropriate points on the relevant self-description scales (Study 2). We also cannot rule out the possibility that simple “nonregressiveness” in prediction, abetted by reliance on the representativeness heuristic ([Tversky & Kahneman, 1974](#)), played a role. However, we can assure the reader that not even the most extreme group members (in terms of either their self-characterizations or their involvement in activist political groups) showed the degree of ideological bias and extremity in construal assumed by our respondents. We also remind the reader that if participants insist on using extreme, prototypic, or “stereotypic” group members as the basis for their inferences even in a laboratory study where they were told not to do so, it is virtually certain that such a tendency produces even more distorted and exaggerated judgments in everyday ideological confrontations outside the laboratory.

Finally, we recognize that there are some obvious problems in using self-reports to assess the accuracy of social perceptions. In particular, it is conceivable that respondents may be unwilling or unable to report their own views accurately and that our respondents' actual perceptions, assumptions, and construals may have been more thoroughly and closely in accord with the political positions they espoused, and more in accord with the predictions made by ideological peers, adversaries, and neutrals alike, than their self-reports in this study have suggested. We add that we have no reason to assume that systematic biases in self-assessment or self-report did occur (or, more to the point, no reason to assume that it was any such biases that produced the pattern of results we obtained). Nevertheless, we do recognize the need for caution in interpreting and generalizing results that use self-assessments, especially discrepancies in self-assessments, to test the accuracy of social beliefs and predictions.

Theoretical Implications [↗](#)

Our analyses and findings help to illuminate the complex possibilities for misunderstanding and misattribution that arise in the context of social-political debate. It has long been recognized that opposing partisans may not simply be disagreeing about the most reasonable position to be adopted concerning the issue at hand. Rather, they may be proceeding from different factual assumptions about, or different construals of that issue; that is, in [Asch's \(1940, 1948\)](#) terms, disagreeing not about the “judgment of the social object” but about the (nature of) the “object of judgment.” To the extent that the opposing partisans fail to recognize, or fail to make allowance

for such construal differences, misattributions and misunderstandings become inevitable. Our studies of partisan perception and perceptions of partisanship, however, produced notably few examples of such blindness to differences in perception or construal. On the contrary, on measure after measure our participants overestimated such differences. This recognition, even exaggeration, of construal differences vis-à-vis ideological adversaries however, did not reflect a charitable interpretation of the corresponding differences in political positions (e.g., the view that one's adversaries were fair-minded people who had proceeded logically from different factual assumptions and interpretations to reach different but not unreasonable conclusions). Instead, our measures suggest that the opposing partisans, and neutrals as well, deemed the relevant construal differences to be the product rather than the source of ideological or political bias. Our participants, in short, assumed that they alone proceeded from facts or reasonable factual assumptions, guided by reasonable ethical and philosophical principles, but generally untainted by ideological or political bias.

Underlying this seemingly smug and self-congratulatory stance, we have argued, is a more fundamental illusion, one that has been central to social psychology's long-standing exploration of subjectivism or naive realism (Asch, 1940; Griffin & Ross, 1991; Lewin, 1948; Ross & Nisbett, 1991; Ross & Ward, in press-a). The basis for this illusion is the individual's conviction that he or she perceives reality objectively and that reality will be similarly perceived by those who share that objectivity. This conviction, in turn, may lead people to treat the viewpoints held and expressed by those who disagree with them about important social or political issues as evidence of subjective bias on the part of those opponents, bias not only in proceeding from evidence to conclusions but also in construing the evidence itself. Indeed, once people decide that others are guided by ideology (rather than the evidence and common sense), it becomes logical to assume that these others, friends and foes alike, will differ significantly from them in their construals and beliefs about a wide range of issues. They decide that these others, unlike themselves, will perceive the world in a manner that is consistent with, indeed reinforcing of, such ideological biases. They insist that they alone, unfettered by ideological blinders, will be able to see and be forced to confront the complexity of issues and problems, obliged to choose not between black and white but among subtle shades of gray. Although our findings are consistent with such theorizing, they obviously do not demand it. Indeed, we are well aware that conventional theories of stereotyping could generate predictions of exaggerated ideological extremity and consistency (although such theories would surely have to be stretched mightily to encompass construals, rather than actions and attributes, to embrace perceptions of in-groups as well as those of out-groups and to address differences in the sources of own vs. others' views). However, we do regard our findings as an encouraging development in our continuing efforts to link social misunderstanding and misattribution to more basic cognitive or motivational processes (see Griffin & Ross, 1991; Ross & Ward, in press-b).

Before turning from theoretical implications to practical ones, an obvious question remains: When are construal differences likely to be unanticipated and unrecognized (or at least underestimated) and when are such differences likely to be anticipated and even exaggerated? One answer involves the level and salience of social debate. Issues such as abortion rights and racial animosity are the topic of ongoing, outspoken, social dialogue. Even if many people once tacitly assumed that those on the other side of such issues were proceeding from the same facts and assumptions as they themselves, years of exposure to partisans on the other side, especially through the news media, are likely to have disabused them. Indeed, the dynamics of informal and formal social debate are apt to heighten one's impressions and assumptions about the construal biases exhibited by the other side. That is, in social discussion people are generally less interested in revealing the complexities and sources of ambivalence in their positions—particularly if they are publicly representing one side to a dispute (Druckman, 1971)—than in

defending their basic stance and persuading others. Nor, as decades of group dynamics research taught us, do partisans lightly reveal their doubts or ambivalence to their ideological peers—lest they face coolness, suspicion, criticism, or even ostracism. As a result, people are likely to hear biased samples of partisan assumptions and construals from fellow partisans and adversaries alike. In other words, the theories people hold about partisan differences in construal and the data they receive about such views from everyday experience are likely to be mutually reinforcing.

By the same token, when there is an absence of social debate, when sharply defined factions have failed to emerge and identify themselves, people are not apt to be confronted with differences in construal or even obliged to consider the possibility that such differences may exist. Indeed, in our study (and, no doubt, often in everyday social experience), people may be induced to assume and even exaggerate the extent of construal differences only when they are explicitly required to consider the question of construal similarities and differences. When not prompted to do so, the norm may be a type of “mindlessness” (Langer, 1978) in which no consideration of construal, much less differences in construal, occurs at all. That is, like young children, people characteristically may not stop to contemplate the difference between appearance and reality (Flavell, 1985) or to consider the possibility that others may not share their perspectives. Instead, people may simply respond to what seem to them to be the opportunities and demands of the environment, with little consideration of the reasons why others might be responding differently to that same environment. Indeed, when one finds that another person has responded differently to an object of social, political, or ethical judgment than one has, and no basis for assuming ideological differences presents itself, one may still conclude that the other person lacks objectivity. For in failing to recognize the inherent subjectivity of one's own construal, one is prone to presume bias on the part of the other.

Implications for Conflict Resolution

Although we did not explicitly address the topic of conflict resolution, a few observations may be in order. First, members of opposing factions who overestimate differences in their working assumptions, priorities, and sympathies are apt to be overly pessimistic about the prospect of finding common ground in their views, interests, or goals (Clark & Marshall, 1981). Members of pro-choice and pro-life factions, we believe, who took the trouble to candidly air the details of their views might find more in the way of shared interests than they anticipate (Keltner & Robinson, 1993). For instance, they might find that they agree not only about the need for programs designed to prevent unwanted pregnancies but also about the need for programs—such as on-site day care for working mothers—that would make alternatives to abortions less daunting. Yet, the discussion and negotiation necessary to become aware of such areas of potential agreement may be precluded by erroneous assumptions about the ideological orthodoxy of the other side.

Our research thus suggests the value of candid, relatively informal discussions (and of developing personal relations and settings that encourage such candor), discussions in which participants talk about their factual assumptions and the complexities of their values rather than simply defending their positions (for related research on the benefits of this type of discussion, see Druckman, Broome, & Korper, 1988; Thompson, 1991; Walcott, Hopmann, & King, 1977). Even if such discussions do not lead to consensus about policy, they could at least reduce stereotyping (by neutral observers as well as by the partisans themselves) and allow the partisans to see the other side as less of an unreasoning, unreasonable, ideologically driven monolith. In fact, such discussions would also free partisans of some illusions that they hold not only about their ideological adversaries but about their own side as well (i.e., illusions of homogeneity, moral consensus [Janis, 1972], and extremism), which would in turn make it easier for them to express

their own dissenting views. Indeed, it has been proposed that both third parties ([Rubin, 1980](#)) and moderates within groups ([Jacobson, 1981](#)) can play a valuable role in facilitating the relevant dialogue, especially in encouraging partisans predisposed toward extremism to get beyond rhetoric and statements of position to underlying interests, assumptions, concerns, and especially sources of uncertainty and ambivalence (see also [Fisher & Ury, 1981](#); [Pruitt & Rubin, 1986](#); [Suskind & Cruikshank, 1987](#)).

Beyond any specific applied implications, our research serves simply to refocus attention on the subjective world of people who are in social conflicts. It is difficult enough to deal with the hostility and distrust that arise from real differences in viewpoints arising from real differences in objective interests and experiences. Researchers must therefore do what they can to recognize and attenuate any hostility and distrust that arises from misperceptions and misattributions. In particular, they must be vigilant for instances in which people respond less to each other's actual views than to tacit but erroneous assumptions about such views and about the character of those who hold them.

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¹At the time of Study 1 (summer 1989), both the attention given to the abortion issue and the zeal of pro-choice and pro-life factions were at a high point because of the various cases pending before the United States Supreme Court. [\[Context Link\]](#)

²In both Study 1 and Study 2, 1 or 2 respondents failed to answer the relevant questionnaire completely. As a result, degrees of freedom varied slightly for different statistical comparisons. [\[Context Link\]](#)

³This self-labeling occurred at the end of the questionnaire on a two-part item. The first part asked respondents to circle either pro-choice or pro-life. The second part asked them to indicate how *strongly* they believed in their position, using a 7-point scale (1 = *not strongly at all*, 7 = *very strongly*, 4 = *with moderate strength*). Only the questionnaires of partisans circling the two most extreme points (i.e., 6 or 7) were used in the study. [\[Context Link\]](#)

⁴This simple wording used to elicit respondents' estimates or perceptions regarding the views of the two partisan groups merits some comment. On the one hand, the wording was *conservative* with regard to our overestimation hypothesis, because the partisans whose views we actually tallied, rather than being typical, were activists who belonged to campus organizations concerned with the abortion issue (and thus were likely to hold views more extreme than the statistical mean, median, or mode of their group). On the other hand, to some respondents the word *typical* might connote *prototypical* or *most exemplary* and thus prompt them to offer not estimates of statistical averages (i.e., means, medians, or modes) but characteristics shown by the most extreme group members. It will become apparent later that the class of partisans about whom estimates were to be made was defined somewhat differently in our two studies. As will also become apparent, the pattern of findings to be discussed did not depend either on the way the target groups were characterized or on the types of estimates (means, proportions, etc.) that were being made about those groups. [\[Context Link\]](#)

⁵We should note parenthetically that the statistical significance of *all* of these findings, and some others to follow, would have greatly increased if a less conservative test had been used (i.e., a test determining whether the actual difference obtained fell within a confidence interval for the participants' estimates). Instead, unless otherwise indicated, we treated each observed or actual mean difference as a sample statistic subject to estimation error (indeed, a statistic based on a relatively small sample) and as a result markedly, but we think appropriately, reduced the power of our test. [\[Context Link\]](#)

⁶For this second phase of Study 1, unlike the initial phase of Study 1 (and, for that matter, unlike Study 2), we analyzed the data using tests that treated the means of the actual reports as population parameters rather than sample statistics. This less conservative approach seemed appropriate because participants in this second phase were specifically asked, beyond providing self-reports, to estimate the responses of pro-choice and pro-life supporters in the particular introductory psychology class of which they were a member. Thus, the respondents' self-reports made up the entire population of responses to which their estimates were compared. [\[Context Link\]](#)

⁷For these tasks, and the other items discussed later the order of items and response measures was varied such that some participants offered all three ratings (i.e., self, liberal, and conservative) for each of the items in turn, some filled out self-ratings for all items before filling out liberal and conservative ratings, and the rest filled out liberal and conservative ratings before providing self-ratings. Analysis revealed no significant interactions (all probability values were greater than .10) between response order and response type on any of these items; accordingly, order effects receive no further consideration in our subsequent analyses and discussion. [\[Context Link\]](#)

⁸The interitem reliability (Cronbach's alpha) of these 12 statements was .68. [\[Context Link\]](#)

⁹It is worth noting that the 9 liberal respondents who characterized themselves as extreme (1 on our scale) displayed no greater pro-victim bias than the 14 who characterized themselves as less extreme (2 on our scale). In fact, these more extreme liberals exhibited slightly *less* pro-victim bias ($M = 62.6$) than did the less extreme liberals ($M = 63.5$). By the same token, although only 1 of the 20 conservative respondents chose to use the most extreme point on the 7-point preference scale, the degree of bias shown by that respondent was virtually indistinguishable from the mean level shown by the 19 respondents who characterized their conservatism with a 6 on the 7-point scale ($M_s = 52.8$ vs. 54.3 , respectively). Accordingly, it seems unlikely that using samples of partisans that had included more individuals who checked 1 or 7 (instead of 2 or 6) would have yielded partisan construals that matched the respondents' extreme predictions. In other words, the overestimation phenomena in question is unlikely to represent an artifact arising either from the particular operational definition of partisanship that we adopted or from any tendency for respondents to overestimate the proportion of 1s and 7s in the partisan groups whose responses they were being asked to estimate. [\[Context Link\]](#)

¹⁰[Robinson and Keltner \(1994\)](#) and [Keltner and Robinson \(1994\)](#) have undertaken further survey research to clarify this issue. [\[Context Link\]](#)

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