

## Research Article

# Misperceptions in Intergroup Conflict

## Disagreeing About What We Disagree About

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**ABSTRACT**—*Two studies examined misperceptions of disagreement in partisan social conflicts, namely, in the debates over abortion (Study 1) and politics (Study 2). We observed that partisans tend to exaggerate differences of opinion with their adversaries. Further, we found that perceptions of disagreement were more pronounced for values that were central to the perceiver's own ideology than for values that were central to the ideology of the perceiver's adversaries. To the extent that partisans assumed disagreement concerning personally important values, they were also inaccurate in perceiving their adversaries' actual opinions. Discussion focuses on the cognitive mechanisms underlying misperceptions of disagreement and strategies for reducing intergroup conflict.*

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Members of partisan social groups often view their adversaries with suspicion, distrust, and outright animosity. It is not unusual to hear loyal members of the Republican party complain about Democrats' "attack on traditional family values and the free market," and to hear loyal Democrats chastise Republicans for their "war on the poor" or their "siege on the environment." Such inflamed beliefs not only characterize disputes between these two political parties, but also can be heard in the debates between other social groups with competing ideologies, such as labor-management conflicts, environmentalist-business struggles, tensions between warring nations, and race-related problems. Undoubtedly, such hostile perceptions fuel much of the conflict and discord that surrounds intergroup relations. This article explores several open questions about intergroup perception. Just how accurate are partisans at perceiving the motives, goals, and opinions of their adversaries? Where—and why—do their perceptions go astray?

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The little work that has been carried out on perception of intergroup attitudes has demonstrated the gross inaccuracies of perceivers' intuitions. In one of the first studies in this area, Robinson and his colleagues (Robinson, Keltner, Ward, & Ross, 1995) presented pro-choice and pro-life college students with scenarios describing cases of abortion (e.g., a high-school-age girl who became pregnant). For each scenario, participants expressed the level of sympathy they personally felt and estimated the level of sympathy felt by the typical pro-choice and pro-life participants in the study. Not only did the results show widespread perceptions of disagreement among both partisan groups, but these perceptions, when compared against the appropriate self-report ratings, proved to be greatly exaggerated. For example, pro-choice participants assumed they felt much more sympathy than the pro-life participants would, but, in fact, the two groups reported feeling almost equally sympathetic.

Robinson and his colleagues replicated these perceptions of disagreement with other measures (e.g., estimates of the number of pregnancies resulting from casual affairs) and with other partisan social groups, demonstrating the generality of this finding (see also Keltner & Robinson, 1996, 1997; Robinson & Friedman, 1995; Robinson & Keltner, 1996; Thompson, 1995; Thompson & Nadler, 2000). These results complement and extend now-classic research inspired by social judgment theory, which found that members of partisan groups exaggerated the extremity of messages advocating their adversaries' point of view (e.g., Hovland, Harvey, & Sherif, 1957).

The research we report here took the findings of Robinson et al. (1995) as a starting point and extended this research by considering both the exact nature and source of disagreement perceptions. Like Robinson and his colleagues, we assume that partisans often exaggerate the extent of their disagreement with an out-group. We differ from Robinson et al. by contending that perceptions of disagreement are most prevalent for those values that are core to, or defining of, the perceiver's own ideological stance. In essence, partisans assume that their adversaries

contest the very values they care most deeply about (see the General Discussion for a description of the presumed cognitive mechanisms). Thus, we assume that Republicans see Democrats as desiring to undermine traditional family values—one of the values central to the conservative world view—whereas Democrats view Republicans as wanting to deprive the poor of rights and opportunities—one of the values central to the liberal world view. These perceptions may prove faulty because the typical Democrat probably favors family values, and the typical Republican probably favors the rights of the poor. Thus, each side overestimates the true margin of disagreement.

At the same time, we suspect that partisans perceive far less disagreement between themselves and their adversaries with respect to values that are core to their adversaries' ideological position. People with strong pro-choice leanings, for instance, may favor "the value of human life" (a value typically associated with the pro-life stance) and accurately recognize that those on the pro-life side do as well. Hence, pro-choice people may see minimal difference between their position on this value and that of their pro-life adversaries. In this case, there may be a close correspondence between what partisans assume their adversaries believe and what their adversaries actually report believing.

We conducted two studies to test our hypotheses about assumed (and factual) bases of disagreement, in the context of the debates over abortion (Study 1) and politics (Study 2). In each study, we asked members of partisan social groups to make judgments regarding value issues that were either central or noncentral to their partisan philosophy. For each issue, partisans reported their personal position ("favor" or "oppose") and estimated the position of the typical out-group member.<sup>1</sup> As in Robinson et al. (1995), we compared these responses to obtain three indices: *actual disagreement* (self-rating vs. out-group's self-rating), *perceived disagreement* (self-rating vs. estimate of out-group's position), and *overestimated disagreement* (estimate of out-group's position vs. out-group's self-rating). We predicted that partisans would perceive (and, indeed, exaggerate) disagreement with members of the adversarial group most dramatically on those value issues central to their own philosophical position. For less central value issues, we predicted partisans would perceive less disagreement, and that these perceptions would achieve a greater degree of accuracy.

## STUDY 1: ABORTION

In Study 1, college-age students on both sides of the abortion debate expressed their own positions and estimated the typical out-group member's position regarding four value issues: the value of human life, a moral code of sexual conduct, women's

reproductive rights, and freedom from government interference in private lives. The former two are issues frequently cited by pro-life persons as a rationale for eliminating legalized abortion. In contrast, pro-choice individuals often mention the latter two issues as grounds to maintain the legal status of abortion. Thus, it appears that these sets of values are central to the pro-life and pro-choice ideological positions, respectively. Therefore, examining perceptions regarding these issues afforded a test of our key hypotheses.

## Method

Participants ( $N = 199$ ) were University of Iowa students enrolled in an elementary psychology course. We invited students with strong opinions for and against the legalization of abortion to participate. Participants were given a questionnaire that asked them first to identify their attitude toward legalized abortion ( $-5 = \textit{strongly oppose}$ ,  $+5 = \textit{strongly favor}$ ). They were then presented with the two pro-choice value issues (*women's reproductive rights* and *freedom from government interference in private lives*) and the two pro-life issues (*the value of human life* and *a moral code of sexual conduct*), with the order of the first and last two value issues counterbalanced across participants. For each issue, participants indicated their own position and estimated the position of the typical out-group member on a single scale anchored by *strongly opposed to* ( $-5$ ) and *strongly in favor of* ( $+5$ ). To verify our intuitions that these values differentiated the core beliefs of the two groups, participants then rated ( $1 = \textit{not at all important}$ ,  $11 = \textit{very important}$ ) and rank-ordered each value issue in terms of its importance to their attitude stance.

## Results

For all of the reported analyses, we averaged participants' ratings for the two pro-choice value issues and the two pro-life value issues.

### Importance Ratings

Consistent with their self-proclaimed ideological positions, pro-choice participants rated and ranked the pro-choice issues as more important to their attitude stance than the pro-life issues,  $t_s(124) \geq 3.63$ ,  $p_s < .001$ ,  $d_s \geq 0.32$ . Pro-life participants felt the pro-life issues were more important than the pro-choice issues,  $t_s(73) \geq 8.75$ ,  $p_s \leq .001$ ,  $d_s \geq 1.02$ . These differences in perceived importance of the values are critical to our argument and to understanding the perceptions of disagreement reported in this section.

### Actual Disagreement

To be sure, there existed real differences of opinion between the groups. Relative to pro-life participants, pro-choice participants had more favorable personal attitudes toward the pro-choice issues,  $t(197) = 11.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.68$ , and less favorable

<sup>1</sup>In each study, we also collected estimates of the in-group opinion. These estimates were highly similar to self-ratings in all cases. Therefore, our findings and conclusions about perceived disagreement also extend to situations in which partisans think about general differences of opinion between in-group and out-group members.

**TABLE 1**

*Average Self-Ratings and Estimates of the Out-Group’s Position Among Pro-Choice and Pro-Life Participants in Study 1*

Value issue	Self-rating		Estimate of out-group’s position	
	PC group	PL group	PC group’s view of PL position	PL group’s view of PC position
Women’s reproductive rights	<b>4.09 (1.28)</b>	−0.04 (3.09)	<b>−1.85 (2.65)</b>	2.64 (2.84)
Freedom from interference	<b>3.15 (1.78)</b>	1.61 (2.24)	<b>−0.53 (2.88)</b>	1.86 (3.29)
Average for PC values	<b>3.62 (1.32)</b>	0.78 (2.16)	<b>−1.19 (2.35)</b>	2.25 (2.58)
Value of human life	3.90 (1.34)	<b>4.58 (0.70)</b>	3.13 (2.84)	<b>0.92 (2.84)</b>
Moral code of sexual conduct	1.81 (2.75)	<b>2.99 (1.90)</b>	2.82 (2.81)	<b>−1.38 (2.53)</b>
Average for PL values	2.85 (1.70)	<b>3.78 (1.11)</b>	2.97 (2.63)	<b>−0.23 (2.21)</b>

**Note.** PC = pro-choice, PL = pro-life. Standard deviations are in parentheses. Ratings were made on a scale from −5 (*strongly opposed to*) to +5 (*strongly in favor of*). Boldface indicates the important value issues for the group in question. *n* = 125 for the pro-choice group and 74 for the pro-life group.

attitudes toward the pro-life issues,  $t(197) = 4.20, p < .001, d = 0.61$  (Tables 1 and 2). Thus, the two groups differed in their self-reported positions toward the value issues, in a manner congruent with their particular ideological preferences.

*Perceived Disagreement*

To examine perceptions of disagreement, we compared participants’ self-ratings and their estimates of the typical out-group member. Larger scores indicate a greater absolute difference between the perceived opinions of self and out-group. We calculated perceptions of disagreement separately for the pro-choice and pro-life issues, and submitted scores to a 2 (group: pro-choice vs. pro-life) × 2 (value issue: pro-choice vs. pro-life) mixed-model analysis of variance (ANOVA), with value issue as a within-subjects factor. As predicted, perceived disagreement was much greater for the important issues than for the unimportant ones, as revealed by the highly significant Group ×

Value Issue interaction,  $F(1, 196) = 186.32, p < .001, d = 0.97$  (Table 2).

A closer look showed that the pro-choice participants perceived more disagreement with their pro-life counterparts with respect to women’s reproductive rights and freedom from government interference than with respect to the value of human life and a moral code,  $t(123) = 15.50, p < .001, d = 1.39$ . The pro-life participants saw matters much differently. For them, the true source of disagreement was with respect to the value of human life and a moral code, which they assumed they favored far more than pro-choice people did; they perceived much less disagreement between themselves and pro-choice people regarding the two pro-choice issues,  $t(73) = 5.74, p < .001, d = 0.67$ . There was also a significant main effect of value issue,  $F(1, 196) = 8.51, p < .01, d = 0.21$ , which revealed that perceptions of disagreement were generally greater for pro-choice issues than for pro-life issues. Group did not have a significant main effect,  $F < 1, d = .06$ .

**TABLE 2**

*Average Actual, Perceived, and Overestimated Disagreement Among Pro-Choice and Pro-Life Participants in Study 1*

Value issue	Actual disagreement between groups	Perceived disagreement between PC and PL positions		Overestimated disagreement between PC and PL positions	
		Among PC group	Among PL group	PC group’s view of PL position	PL group’s view of PC position
Women’s reproductive rights	4.13 (0.31)	<b>5.94 (3.05)</b>	2.68 (4.75)	<b>−1.81 (2.65)</b>	−1.45 (2.83)
Freedom from interference	1.54 (0.29)	<b>3.68 (3.33)</b>	0.26 (3.89)	<b>−2.14 (2.88)</b>	−1.29 (3.29)
Average for PC values	2.84 (0.25)	<b>4.81 (2.73)</b>	1.47 (3.41)	<b>−1.97 (2.35)</b>	−1.37 (2.58)
Value of human life	0.69 (0.17)	0.77 (3.12)	<b>3.66 (2.84)</b>	−1.45 (2.84)	<b>−2.98 (2.84)</b>
Moral code of sexual conduct	1.18 (0.36)	1.00 (4.36)	<b>4.36 (3.28)</b>	−0.17 (2.81)	<b>−3.19 (2.53)</b>
Average for PL values	0.93 (0.22)	0.90 (1.75)	<b>4.01 (2.55)</b>	−0.82 (2.63)	<b>−3.08 (2.21)</b>

**Note.** PC = pro-choice, PL = pro-life. Standard deviations are in parentheses. Actual disagreement was computed from the absolute difference between the pro-life group’s self-ratings and the pro-choice group’s self-ratings. Perceived disagreement was computed from the absolute difference between self-ratings and estimates of the out-group’s position. Overestimated disagreement was computed by subtracting the out-group’s self-ratings from estimates of the out-group’s position. Boldface indicates the important value issues for the group in question.

**TABLE 3**

*Average Self-Ratings, Estimates of the Out-Group's Position, and Perceived Disagreement Among Members of Pro-Choice Advocacy Groups*

Value issue	Self-rating	Estimate of out-group's position	Perceived disagreement between PC and PL positions
Women's reproductive rights	<b>4.87 (0.45)</b>	<b>-3.37 (2.12)</b>	<b>8.24 (2.16)</b>
Freedom from interference	<b>3.84 (1.31)</b>	<b>-0.48 (3.17)</b>	<b>4.32 (3.68)</b>
Average for PC values	<b>4.36 (0.73)</b>	<b>-1.93 (2.12)</b>	<b>6.28 (2.38)</b>
Value of human life	4.59 (0.96)	3.71 (2.61)	0.88 (2.62)
Moral code of sexual conduct	2.37 (2.98)	4.05 (1.96)	1.68 (3.46)
Average for PL values	3.48 (1.57)	3.87 (1.87)	1.28 (2.11)

**Note.** PC = pro-choice, PL = pro-life. Standard deviations are in parentheses. Ratings were made on a scale from -5 (*strongly opposed to*) to +5 (*strongly in favor of*). Perceived disagreement was computed from the absolute difference between self-ratings and estimates of the out-group's position. Boldface indicates the important value issues for pro-choice advocacy groups.  $n = 361$ .

### *Overestimated Disagreement*

Clearly, partisans perceived larger intergroup differences of opinion for their own key values than for their adversaries' key values. Given the real differences of opinion already mentioned, to what extent were these imagined differences on (or off) of the mark? We compared participants' estimates of the out-group opinion with the self-ratings made by out-group members as a benchmark. Numbers below zero indicate that partisans underestimated the extent to which their adversaries endorsed these values. The ANOVA yielded the predicted Group  $\times$  Value Issue interaction,  $F(1, 196) = 34.09, p < .001, d = 0.41$ , indicating that both partisan groups were more inaccurate when estimating their adversaries' opinions about issues that were more (rather than less) important to themselves (Table 2). Pro-choice participants underestimated the favorability of pro-life participants' opinions more for the pro-choice issues than for the pro-life issues,  $t(123) = 3.80, p < .001, d = 0.34$ , whereas pro-life participants underestimated the favorability of pro-choice people's opinions more substantially for the pro-life issues than for the pro-choice issues,  $t(73) = 4.55, p < .001, d = 0.53$ . There was also a significant main effect of group,  $F(1, 196) = 9.78, p < .01, d = 0.22$ , revealing that pro-life participants were more inaccurate overall than pro-choice participants in estimating their adversaries' true opinions. Value issue did not have a significant main effect,  $F(1, 196) = 1.20, p > .10, d = 0.08$ . Thus, not only did partisans assume their adversaries disagreed with them about the values underlying their own ideologies, but these assumptions did not match the reality of their adversaries' true beliefs and so tended to be highly exaggerated.

### *Replication*

As a partial replication of Study 1, we contacted numerous pro-choice advocacy groups around the Midwest and invited members of these groups to complete the same questionnaire anonymously (on the Internet). Like the pro-choice students, these advocacy-group members ( $N = 361$ ) felt the pro-choice issues were more important than the pro-life issues,  $t(350) \geq 8.80$ ,

$ps \leq .001, ds \geq 0.47$ . Most important, they perceived far more disagreement with pro-life people about pro-choice issues than about pro-life issues,  $t(348) = 31.87, p < .001, d = 1.70$  (Table 3). Interestingly, the advocacy-group members were even more extreme than our sample of pro-choice college students in how much disagreement they perceived about pro-choice issues,  $t(473) = 5.72, p < .001, d = 0.59$ . Advocacy-group members and pro-choice college students were more comparable in their perceptions about pro-life issues,  $t(473) = 1.81, p = .04, d = 0.19$ .

Two important points may be made about these findings. First, a reasonable assumption would be that advocacy-group members might have a more balanced, nuanced view of their adversaries' opinions by virtue of their repeated exposure to pro-life rhetoric and arguments. They did not. Second, these deeply committed advocacy-group members were even more prone than the students to perceive disagreement about personally important values. This suggests that attitude strength (or issue commitment) may moderate asymmetrical perceptions of disagreement.

## **STUDY 2: POLITICS**

Our main goal in Study 2 was to extend these findings to a new domain of social conflict, namely, the ongoing debate between Republicans and Democrats over national and international policy. Unlike the agendas of the partisan groups involved in the abortion debate, the agendas of these two groups are not mutually exclusive. Republican values seem to embrace a strong national defense and strict deterrence of crime, whereas Democrat values seem to embrace eliminating social inequalities and strengthening the public education system. Although there is probably substantial overlap in the opinions of the two groups regarding these values, our intuitions nevertheless told us that members of these partisan social groups would perceive (and overestimate) disagreement with their political adversaries, particularly for the values defining their own party doctrine.

**TABLE 4**

*Average Self-Ratings and Estimates of the Out-Group's Position Among Republican, Democrat, and Neutral Participants in Study 2*

Value issue	Self-rating		Estimate of out-group's position			
			REP group's view of DEM position	DEM group's view of REP position	NEUT group's view of REP position	NEUT group's view of DEM position
	REP group	DEM group				
Crime prevention	<b>3.57 (1.26)</b>	1.79 (2.62)	<b>0.85 (2.23)</b>	3.76 (1.35)	2.97 (2.27)	1.33 (2.28)
Strong military	<b>3.79 (1.20)</b>	1.21 (2.41)	<b>0.04 (2.08)</b>	4.24 (0.83)	3.23 (2.32)	2.13 (1.80)
Average for REP values	<b>3.68 (1.00)</b>	1.50 (2.33)	<b>0.44 (1.88)</b>	4.00 (1.04)	3.10 (1.88)	1.73 (1.52)
Public education	3.75 (1.18)	<b>4.52 (1.09)</b>	3.43 (1.32)	<b>1.07 (2.58)</b>	1.97 (2.37)	3.00 (1.62)
Eliminating inequalities	2.04 (1.69)	<b>4.31 (0.89)</b>	3.89 (1.34)	<b>-0.34 (2.54)</b>	0.80 (2.11)	3.00 (2.23)
Average for DEM values	2.89 (1.09)	<b>4.41 (0.72)</b>	3.66 (1.12)	<b>0.36 (2.31)</b>	1.38 (1.97)	3.00 (1.76)

Note. REP = Republican, DEM = Democrat, NEUT = neutral. Standard deviations are in parentheses. Ratings were made on a scale from -5 (strongly opposed to) to +5 (strongly in favor of). Boldface indicates the important value issues for the group in question.  $n = 28$  for Republicans, 29 for Democrats, and 30 for the neutral-unaffiliated participants.

A second broad goal of Study 2 was to examine the perceptions of individuals who were unaffiliated with either of the partisan groups. Our claim is that partisans assume disagreement with their adversaries along personally relevant value issues rather than less relevant ones. This suggests that unaffiliated individuals (who do not subscribe to one set of values over another) would be less prone to the perceptions of disagreement that afflict partisans, and particularly would be less prone to the highly exaggerated perceptions of disagreement about personally relevant values. To test this possibility, we included a group of politically neutral participants and contrasted their responses with those of our Republican and Democrat samples.

**Method**

We pretested a large number of political issues to identify a set of four that differentiated the Republican and Democrat philosophies. Participants ( $N = 88$ ) in the main study were students recruited from an elementary psychology course at the University of Iowa. They were administered a questionnaire structured identically to the one used in Study 1, except they first indicated their political affiliation (Republican, Democrat, neutral-unaffiliated), and we replaced the abortion-related issues with the two value issues rated most important by Republicans (*crime prevention* and *a strong military*) and the two value issues rated most important by Democrats (*funding of public education* and *eliminating social inequalities*) in pretesting.

**Results**

For all of the reported analyses, we averaged responses to the two conservative and two liberal value issues.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Degrees of freedom in the analyses vary slightly because of missing responses.

*Importance Ratings*

Not surprisingly, Republicans felt the two traditionally conservative issues were more important to their political stance than the two traditionally liberal issues,  $ts(27) \geq 1.88, ps \leq .07, ds \geq 0.36$ . In contrast, Democrats felt the liberal issues were more important than the conservative ones,  $ts(28) \geq 5.14, ps \leq .001, ds \geq 0.95$ .

*Actual Disagreement*

The Republicans had more favorable personal attitudes toward the conservative issues than the Democrats did,  $t(55) = 4.56, p < .001, d = 1.21$ , whereas the Democrats had more favorable attitudes toward the liberal issues than the Republicans did,  $t(55) = 6.23, p < .001, d = 1.65$  (Tables 4 and 5).

*Perceived Disagreement*

Once again, partisans presumed more disagreement with their adversaries for personally important value issues than for less important ones, as highlighted by the significant Group  $\times$  Value Issue interaction,  $F(1, 55) = 37.26, p < .001, d = 0.81$  (Table 5). More precisely, Republicans perceived greater disagreement with Democrats about the conservative issues than about the liberal issues,  $t(27) = 5.98, p < .001, d = 1.13$ , whereas Democrats perceived greater disagreement with Republicans about the liberal issues than about the conservative ones,  $t(28) = 3.21, p < .01, d = 0.60$ . There was also a (trivial) main effect of group,  $F(1, 55) = 6.14, p < .05, d = 0.66$ , indicating that Democrats perceived more overall disagreement than Republicans did. Value issue did not have a significant main effect,  $F < 1, d = 0.26$ .

The politically neutral participants, however, saw much less disagreement between Republicans and Democrats than these groups saw between themselves, at least in regard to the personally important values. Concerning conservative issues,

TABLE 5

Average Actual, Perceived, and Overestimated Disagreement Among Republican, Democrat, and Neutral Participants in Study 2

Value issue	Actual disagreement between REP and DEM groups	Perceived disagreement between REP and DEM positions			Overestimated disagreement between REP and DEM positions			
		Among REP group	Among DEM group	Among NEUT group	REP group's view of DEM position	DEM group's view of REP position	NEUT group's view of DEM position	NEUT group's view of REP position
Crime prevention	1.78 (0.55)	<b>2.72 (1.96)</b>	1.97 (3.11)	1.63 (3.70)	<b>-0.94 (2.19)</b>	0.19 (1.35)	-0.46 (2.28)	-0.60 (2.27)
Strong military	2.58 (0.51)	<b>3.75 (2.19)</b>	3.03 (2.65)	1.10 (3.19)	<b>-1.17 (2.08)</b>	0.45 (0.83)	0.92 (1.80)	-0.56 (2.31)
Average for REP values	2.18 (0.48)	<b>3.23 (1.53)</b>	2.50 (2.67)	1.37 (2.49)	<b>-1.06 (1.89)</b>	0.32 (1.04)	0.23 (1.52)	-0.58 (1.88)
Public education	0.77 (0.30)	0.32 (1.66)	<b>3.45 (2.53)</b>	1.03 (3.03)	-1.09 (1.32)	<b>-2.68 (2.58)</b>	-1.52 (1.62)	-1.78 (2.37)
Eliminating inequalities	2.28 (0.36)	1.86 (1.96)	<b>4.66 (2.65)</b>	2.20 (3.53)	-0.42 (1.34)	<b>-2.38 (2.54)</b>	-1.31 (2.23)	-1.24 (2.11)
Average for DEM values	1.52 (0.24)	1.09 (1.26)	<b>4.05 (2.35)</b>	1.62 (2.97)	-0.75 (1.12)	<b>-2.53 (2.31)</b>	-1.42 (1.76)	-1.51 (1.97)

**Note.** REP = Republican, DEM = Democrat, NEUT = neutral. Standard deviations are in parentheses. Actual disagreement was computed from the absolute difference between Republicans' self-ratings and Democrats' self-ratings. Perceived disagreement was computed from the absolute difference between self-ratings and estimates of the out-group's position (for the neutral group, perceived disagreement was the absolute difference between estimates about Republicans and Democrats). Overestimated disagreement was computed by subtracting the out-group's self-ratings from estimates of the out-group's position. Boldface indicates the important value issues for the group in question.

Republicans saw more difference of opinion between themselves and Democrats than neutrals perceived between the two groups,  $t(56) = 3.41, p < .01, d = 0.89$ ; for liberal issues, Democrats perceived more disagreement with Republicans than neutrals perceived between the groups,  $t(57) = 3.48, p < .01, d = 0.90$ .

#### Overestimated Disagreement

Both Republicans and Democrats underestimated the favorability of each others' opinions more for the personally important value issues than for the less important ones, as revealed by the significant Group  $\times$  Value Issue interaction,  $F(1, 55) = 26.93, p < .001, d = 1.37$  (Table 5). Among Democrats, underestimation of the Republican position was much greater for the liberal issues than for the conservative issues,  $t(28) = 6.15, p < .001, d = 1.14$ , and among Republicans, underestimation of the Democrat position was slightly greater for the conservative issues than for the liberal issues, but to a nonsignificant degree,  $t < 1, d = 0.15$ . There was also a significant main effect of value issue,  $F(1, 55) = 17.61, p < .001, d = 0.56$ , showing that Republicans and Democrats were overall less accurate in estimating their adversaries' opinions for liberal issues than for conservative issues. The main effect of group was not significant,  $F < 1, d = 0.16$ .

Again, the politically neutral participants had a more balanced and accurate view of the partisans' true opinions than the partisans had about each other. In fact, Republicans underestimated the Democrat position toward the conservative issues by a greater margin than the neutral participants did,  $t(56) = 2.87, p < .01, d = 0.77$ , and Democrats underestimated the attitudes of Republicans toward the liberal issues by a greater margin than the neutral participants did,  $t(57) = 1.83, p = .07, d = 0.48$ .

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Researchers have established that members of partisan groups tend to have inaccurate perceptions regarding the attitudes and advocated positions of out-group members (Hovland et al., 1957; Robinson et al., 1995). The present research examined the precise nature of these exaggerated perceptions. Our research suggests that partisans perceive greater disagreement regarding the value issues they see as central to their own position than regarding less central value issues. The partisans in our studies were more alike in their opinions than they knew, and this fact was lost on them because, in their minds, the conflict was not about their adversaries' central values but their own. Ironically, this led to a situation in which partisans disagreed about what they disagreed about. Each side saw the other as irrationally and stubbornly challenging the very foundation of their personal ideologies, while seeing consensus of opinion about their adversaries' core values. Partisans seemed oblivious to the possibility that their adversaries shared many of their preferences and values, but differed primarily in how they prioritized those values. Such misperceptions, in turn, may cultivate the very feelings of hostility and mistrust that lead to intergroup conflict in the first place.

We are left to speculate on the causes of these misperceptions. We believe a leading candidate explanation is cognitive egocentrism, or the tendency to give unwarranted attention to self-relevant information at the expense of information about other people (Chambers & Windschitl, 2004; Kruger, 1999; M. Ross & Sicoly, 1979). Applied to the present context, egocentrism suggests that partisans may think about their adversaries—and the conflict more generally—primarily from the vantage point of their own values. They may take their adversaries' contrary position in the overall social debate as evidence that their adversaries oppose the values they see as the primary justification for their own position in this debate.

According to this account, partisans do not sufficiently consider the possibility that their adversaries define the debate according to a different set of ideological values. From this perspective, one reason individuals on the pro-choice side see their opponents as combative, illogical, and dogmatic is because in the pro-choice mind-set, pro-life advocates desire to undermine what pro-choice advocates believe is most at stake in the abortion debate—women’s right to self-determination (for similar findings concerning union-management negotiations, see Robinson & Friedman, 1995). Pro-choice people have difficulty appreciating that pro-life people oppose legalized abortion because of a deep devotion to a competing value, namely, the reverence for human life (for research demonstrating the role of egocentrism in other intergroup situations, see Thompson & Loewenstein, 1992, and Wade-Benzoni, Tenbrunsel, & Bazerman, 1996; for research on the role of egocentrism in perspective taking more generally, see Epley, Keysar, Van Boven, & Gilovich, 2004; Hass, 1984; Nickerson, 1999; and L. Ross, Greene, & House, 1977).

An explanation based on motivation to enhance the self or in-group seems less tenable. For one thing, partisans acknowledged their adversaries’ favorable attitudes toward noncentral value issues, even admitting that they themselves had less favorable attitudes toward those issues. Partisans judged their adversaries to have more favorable attitudes than themselves, even though the partisans’ importance ratings implied that they perceived those issues as moderately relevant to their own personal attitudes. A purely motivational account (one based on in-group favoritism and out-group derogation) might suggest that partisans would perceive their adversaries to have less favorable attitudes than themselves on all value issues, which the partisans in our studies clearly did not do. General group stereotypes also seem implausible as an explanation for our findings. If general stereotypes were operating, we would expect to see some uniformity in the estimates offered by different groups about their own and their adversaries’ opinions (e.g., a stereotype that Democrats disfavor a strong military would imply that Republican, Democrat, and politically neutral persons alike would share this belief about Democrats).

Do our findings suggest any practical solutions for reducing intergroup conflict, and perhaps conflict in other types of social bonds? The first and perhaps most obvious solution to intergroup conflict is informing partisans about the actual basis for their adversaries’ opinions, specifically challenging their misconceptions about their adversaries’ opinions about personally relevant values (for research gauging the effectiveness of this solution, see Keltner & Robinson, 1993; Thompson & Hastie, 1990). A second and more subtle approach, one that has yet to be empirically tested, would be to have partisans think about the social conflict through the frame of their adversaries’ ideological values. Doing so might bring partisans to the realization not only that there is an alternative and equally valid set of ideals involved in the debate, but also that they and their adversaries

share similar opinions about those ideals. Indeed, the recognition that one’s adversaries hold a more favorable opinion about those values than one does oneself (as occurred in the present studies) may be a powerful antidote against feelings of enmity and mistrust.

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