The Bias Blind Spot and its Implications

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Everyday events often prompt us to assess the objectivity of opinions and judgments— our own, those of our friends and colleagues, and those of jurists, political leaders, and advocates for interest groups. Was our decision to promote a favored employee tainted by a desire to nurture a friendship or was it the result of an even-handed evaluation of her qualifications? Was the television pundit's bleak assessment of national healthcare influenced by the political leanings of the network's owners or was it a fair evaluation of the proposals on the table? Was a presidential decision to go to war a reflection of cool-headed assessments of national interest or the result of ideological blindness, unwarranted optimism, or personal anger? Indeed, are our assessments of whether our own or others' judgments are biased themselves the product of our personal biases?

A wealth of evidence suggests that people's judgments are subject to a number of cognitive and motivational biases[1]. Individuals consistently rate themselves above average across a variety of domains[2], take credit for their successes but explain away their failures[3], and detect more support for deeply held beliefs than is objectively warranted[4]. Furthermore, people suffer from a "bias blind spot," or the conviction that their own judgments are less susceptible to bias than the judgments of others[5]. People also believe they give more weight to moral considerations[6] and are less self-interested[7] than others. Indeed, there is evidence that people may be *overly* cynical in this regard, predicting greater bias in other's judgments, on average, than proves be the case[8].

In this reading, we review evidence regarding the causes and consequences of this bias blind spot. We first introduce the theoretical perspective of naïve realism and its relevance to perceptions of bias in the self vs. others. We suggest that one source of relative blindness to bias in the self as opposed to others is reliance on introspection, and provide evidence that people view personal connections to an issue as a source of bias in others but enlightenment in the self. We close with a discussion of how the bias blind spot can impede the resolution of conflicts in organizations and beyond.

Naïve Realism

We argue that unwarranted faith in one's own personal objectivity follows naturally from the stance of "naïve realism," or the tacit belief that one's own judgments and understandings of the world—and the decisions, preferences, and priorities that reflect those understandings—are direct and unmediated reflections of objective reality or "the way things are"[9]. The obvious corollary of this epistemic stance is the belief that judgments that *differ* from one's own are

either uninformed, a product of intellectual incapacity or laziness, or a reflection of distorting motivational, ideological, or cognitive bias[10]. A particularly common example of how naïve realism plays out in practice is the tendency for partisans to believe that the media is biased against "their side" on specific controversial issues and in overall political coverage[11]. Stephen Colbert jokingly referred to this tendency when he proclaimed that "reality has a well-known liberal bias"[12]. No doubt, liberals would find this a more accurate parody of conservative views than would conservatives.

Naïve realism and its corollaries, we suggest, are apt to exert considerable influence on the decisions, preferences, and priorities of managers and employees within organizations. For example, a manager's decisions will reflect his or her perception of what is "realistic" with respect to which projects are most worthy of resources, which employees are most deserving of being promoted, and what project goals and timelines are reasonable. That said, others in the organization will each have their own naïve realist perceptions of what is "realistic" and, to the degree that those perceptions do not match those of the manager, conflict is likely to arise. The manager's promotion and resource allocation choices will be seen by those who disagree as biased by self-interest or the temptation to play favorites. The manager, in turn, is apt to view complaints by advocates of non-funded projects and non-promoted employees as reflections of self-interested bias on the part of the disgruntled employees.

Strategies for Assessing Bias

Research shows that managers and employees alike use one of two strategies to determine whether a given judgment is a product of bias[13]. First, both groups may consult their abstract theories of bias. That is, people are aware that human beings are motivated to seek pleasure and avoid pain, that they give heavy weight to their own needs and preferences, and that they have an arsenal of psychological defense mechanisms at their disposal. They also know that their co-workers are inclined to see matters through the prism of their ideology, political stance, and culture. This awareness, in turn, leads people to suspect self-interested bias whenever they hear a claim about a contentious issue that is obviously congruent with the claimants' self-interest or worldview. Thus, the claim that a contested electoral outcome was fair, a procedure for counting votes appropriate, or a judicial decision wise is subject to suspicions of bias when the claim is made by someone whose interests were served by the outcome.

People tend to rely on a different strategy for detecting bias in themselves. Managers and employees look within themselves to determine whether they felt the pull of bias when making the judgment in question. This type of introspection is a good strategy for detecting bias only to the degree that the bias leaves some detectable trace. Introspection is typically viewed as something akin to an archeological exploration, in which true information about their decisions, motives, and personality can be uncovered if one just digs deep enough. Research suggests, however, that this view of introspection is not accurate[14]. Many of the processes that bias our judgments and decisions occur outside of conscious awareness and, as such, leave no trace of their operation[15]. In fact, introspection is likely to lead to the conviction that one's assessments are relatively free of distorting influences[16] and even that one acted *in spite* of one's preferences, not because of them. At the same time, we take other people's claims that their decisions were made objectively with a grain of salt. Simply stated, people are quick to infer self-interested bias on the part of their superiors, peers, and subordinates in the organization[17]. Moreover, people are quite aware that people are capable deceiving themselves and others about the degree to which their judgments and decisions have been free from bias.

Naïve realism and the tendency to look inward for evidence of bias have at least two important implications for organizations. First, people will be more apt to concede that their judgment *in general* is subject to bias than to concede that any *specific* judgment has been tainted. Second, the identities and personal connections of others will be seen as likely sources of bias, whereas a person's own identity and connections will more often be seen as a source of enlightenment.

Do People Detect Less Bias When Relying on Introspection?

People might evaluate whether a judgment is biased either by applying abstract theories of bias or by engaging in introspection—that is, by "looking inward" for evidence of bias. Of course, introspection is only applicable for assessing bias on the part of oneself and it is most relevant for assessing bias in specific judgments. A study by Ehrlinger et al (2005) demonstrates how this influences assessments of bias on the part of oneself and others. The researchers asked undergraduates to consider the degree to which one of two types of self-predictions, or one of two types of predictions made by other students, might be influenced by a bias toward unrealistic

optimism[18]. Participants in the *self-specific* condition were first asked to rate the likelihood that each of 6 events would happen to them (relative to their fellow students):

- receiving an attractive job offer before graduation,
- not finding a job for 6 months,
- suffering from lung cancer,
- owning a home,
- having to take an unattractive job,
- and living past 80.

Participants in the *other-specific* condition were each yoked to a student in the self-specific condition and shown the predictions made by that student. Those in the *self-general* and *other-general* conditions considered the predictions that might be made if they, or the average student at their school, were asked to make these predictions.

Participants were then asked to rate the degree to which the predictions they had just considered might be influenced by *a desire to make accurate, honest assessments* versus *a desire to think positive events likely and negative events unlikely to happen*. As predicted, participants in the study thought that their own predictions were less biased than those of other students and that their own predictions about *specific* outcomes were less subject to bias than generalized assessments they might make (see Figure 1). A follow-up study found that participants explicitly reported giving greater weight to their theories of bias and less weight to introspective evidence when assessing bias in the judgments of another than in assessing bias in themselves.

In short, people appear to consult abstract theories about bias when assessing bias in others, but rely on introspection when assessing bias in themselves—especially with respect to specific judgments they have made. This asymmetry, in turn, encourages people to see themselves as more objective than their peers. It is worth noting that reliance on introspection leaves people free to acknowledge that some of their own *past* judgments—which are no longer subject to such introspection— may have reflected various biases (especially if their judgments have since changed). But naïve realism makes it psychologically, perhaps even logically, impossible to say, for example, that I believe Sarah objectively deserves a raise but my perception of Sarah's deservingness is biased. To acknowledge that bias has played a role would be to say I cling to a belief that Sarah deserves a raise even though I know this belief to be biased and unlikely to be true.

Personal Connection as a Source of Enlightenment or Bias

Naïve realism leads people to be convinced that they are relatively objective and free of distorting biases, but it need not entail the belief that one is a dispassionate observer who brings nothing personal to the task of interpreting issues and events. Everyday experience teaches us that our personal experiences and identities have an impact on our views. Managers, for example know that their perceptions regarding an appropriate project timeline are, in part, a product of the experiences they have had as managers. Similarly, in advocating for federal funding for stem cell research, Congressman Dick Gephardt spoke of caring for his elderly mother and insisted that "unless you've gone through something, you really don't understand it"[19]

More recently, Republican Mayor of San Diego, Jerry Sanders, testified in court that his personal connections to gay and lesbian family and friends gave him an enlightened perspective on the importance of legalizing gay and lesbian marriage. Indeed, Sanders credited his personal connections for correcting what he described as an unconscious, anti-gay bias that impacted his previous political stance. As a result, Sanders reversed prior political commitments and lent his full support to the cause of legalizing gay marriage. Gephardt and Sanders thus not only acknowledged their personal connections, they cited them as essential sources of information rather than sources of bias. In contrast, Maggie Gallagher, of the National Organization for Marriage, viewed Sanders' personal connections as a distorting influence on his view of the issue. In response to Sanders' testimony, Gallagher said, "He gave moving testimony in court today about how much he loves his lesbian daughter…Politicians are not elected to advance the views and values of their families"[20].

Ehrlinger et al (2005) conducted a second set of studies to determine whether people acknowledge that personal connections influence perceptions but show an asymmetry in their beliefs about the impact of such connections on the self versus others. In particular, the researchers wanted to know whether introspection leads people to believe that their own personal connections to a given issue provide them with unusual insight and understanding. At the same time, do they see others' connections as a source of self-serving bias that should be guarded against in making decisions?

In one study, they surveyed Jewish, Arab, and Muslim individuals following the collapse of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process that resulted in a spike in violence. Participants were

asked to indicate whether their own status, or that of members of the other relevant community, had been a source of illumination or bias in evaluating issues relevant to the conflict. As predicted, participants viewed their own status as more enlightening and less biasing than the status of those on the opposing side. Indeed, in absolute terms, Arab and Muslim participants viewed their own personal connections to the issue as a significant source of enlightenment. Jewish participants (most of whom were born in the U.S. and thus perhaps less personally involved in the crisis than the Arab/Muslim participants) did not consider their own connection to the issue to be particularly enlightening, but they also did not see it as a source of bias (see Figure 2).

A second study examined students' assessments of bias on the part of individuals—themselves and other students—with respect to two campus issues. Minority and Caucasian students were asked about the impact that racial identity might have on views regarding affirmative action in University admissions. In addition, varsity and intramural athletes were asked how varsity or non-varsity athletic status might influence views about whether a new weight training room should be reserved for the exclusive use of varsity athletes.

Once again, participants showed the predicted asymmetry in judgments of whether personal connections provided enlightenment or led to bias. Caucasian students thought that ethnicity would bias views about affirmative action policies more for racial minority students than for fellow Caucasians. The opposite was true of minority students, who thought a student's ethnicity would lead to more bias for Caucasian than fellow minority students. Moreover, in absolute terms, minority students thought that a fellow minority student's ethnicity would serve as a significant source of enlightenment rather than bias, whereas Caucasian students thought that the absence of such an identity was a source of slightly more enlightenment than bias. The same pattern was in evidence in student athletes' assessments of bias and enlightened understanding about the use of an exclusive weight room (see Figure 3).

Implications for Conflict Management

This blindspot with respect to one's own biases, but not the biases of others, has important implications for our understanding of interpersonal and intergroup conflict. If people rely on theories about bias when evaluating the views of the other party, but rely on introspection to detect discernible traces of bias in their own views, efforts to resolve disagreements are apt to

meet with frustration. If the disagreement is accompanied by hatred and the conviction that the other party seeks to prevail rather than reach an acceptable compromise, the question of bias becomes secondary. The assumption will be that the other party sees the conflict through the prism of self-interest, its general dislike of "our side," or its misguided ideology. Managers and their employees, for example, will expand little effort in trying to truly understand the perspective of those on the other side of an issue and, as a result, will show little interest in meetings or discussions designed to resolve conflict.

But even if there is no assumption of intractable ill-will and the conflicting parties believe agreement is possible, the road to a mutually-satisfactory solution is bound to be a difficult one and the process of seeking that agreement is apt to engender ill-will and distrust. Evidence from laboratory experiments[21] as well as real world experiences in peace-building through citizen dialogue in Northern Ireland and in the Middle-East[22] suggest that enlightened and good-hearted people on both sides of such conflicts are often willing, even eager, to meet with their counterparts. But that willingness is predicated on the assumption that once one explains to the other side how things "really are"—that is, once one corrects the other side's "misconceptions" about history, motives, conceptions of justice, etc., those on the other side will be willing to make the kinds of concessions they vowed they would never make.

Rarely if ever do the antagonists come to the discussions expressing the hope that doing so will "clear up *my own* misconceptions," or "prompt *me* to see the wisdom of making heretofore unacceptable concessions." Some are optimistic that agreement can be reached; some are wary and regard the process as a test— one that will reveal whether the other side is "serious" about agreement (that is, open to being persuaded) or merely posturing (in which case it would be valuable to discover this and not waste time or effort in fruitless further exchanges). In both cases, however, the dialogue is bound to be frustrating. It can seem that those on the other side are stubbornly clinging to their claims and convictions despite one's efforts to enlighten them with one's own wisdom. People on both sides are likely to assume that they are being reasonable, candid, and objective, and therefore that the other side's intransigence reflects close-mindedness and an unwillingness or inability to overcome their biases. Experience suggests that people who have disagreements within organizations similarly show little interest in "being set straight" and are inclined to attribute resistance by those on the "other side" to close-mindedness or some other failing.

Although full agreement on the issues that divide conflicting parties is often elusive, such "public peace processes" can be valuable. Often the parties discover that, on matters not directly involved with the conflict, those on the other side share their own aspirations and frustrations in pursuit of living meaningful lives, raising healthy children, expanding professional opportunities, and developing peaceful communities. In the course of such discussions, "theories" about those on the other side, particularly theories that stereotype and dehumanize them, can sometimes yield to experience.

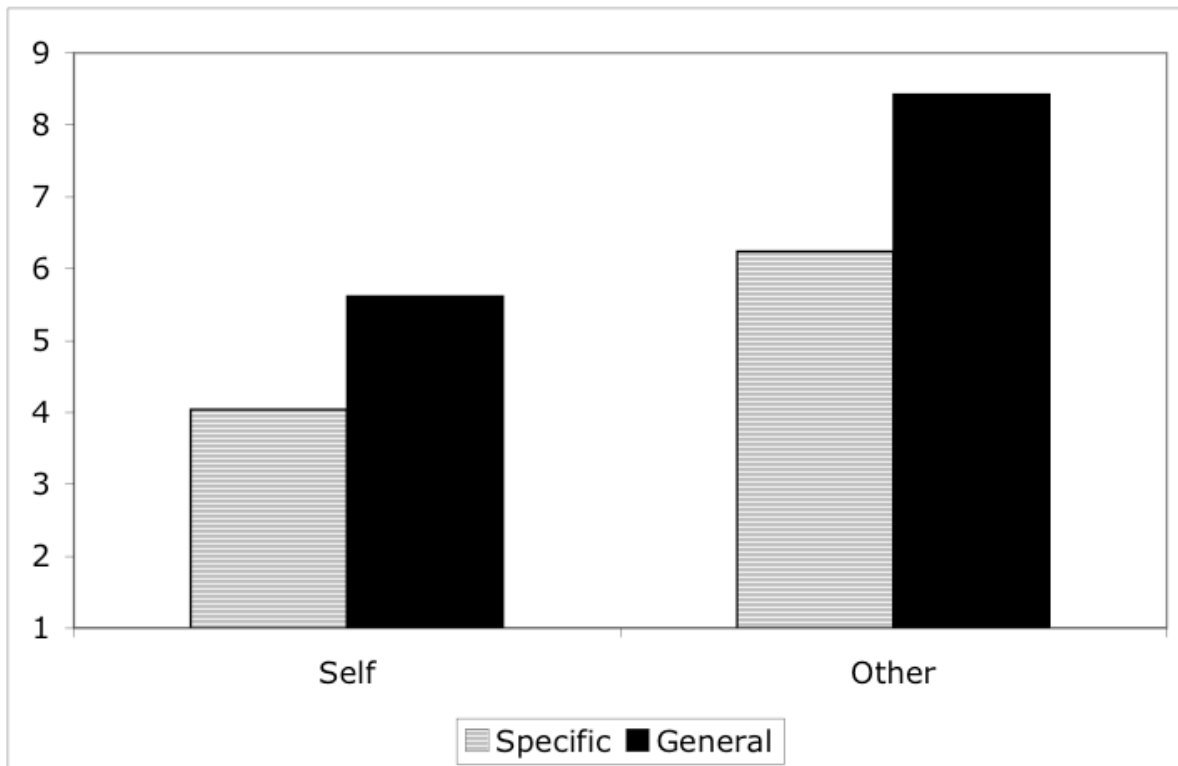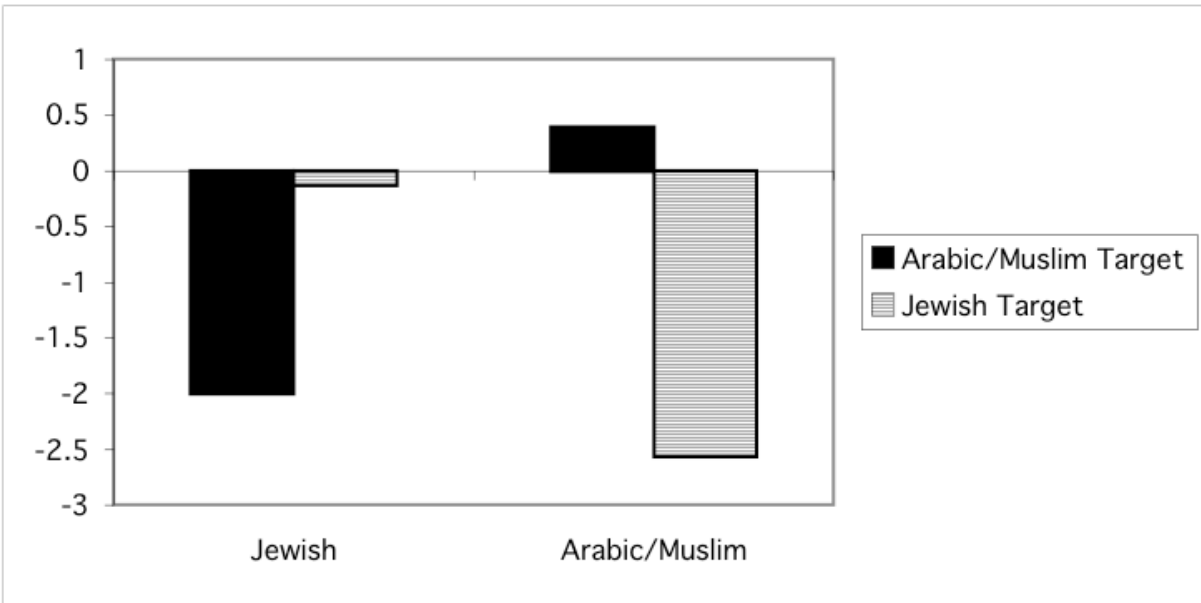Figure 1: Perceived Bias in Predictions of the Future

Figure 2: Perceptions of the degree to which one's ethnic or religious status offers an enlightened as opposed to bias perspective on issues related to the conflict in the Middle East.

Note: Zero represents the midpoint of the scale in Figures 2 and 3, such that positive numbers represent a belief that one's perspective is more enlightened by a personal connection and negative numbers represent a belief that a personal connection leads to a biased perspective on the issue in question.

Figure 3: (a) Perceptions of the degree to which one's ethnicity offers an enlightened as opposed

to a biased perspective on attitudes about affirmative action.

(b) Perceptions of the degree to which one's athletic status offers an enlightened as

opposed to a biased perspective on allocation of athletic space.
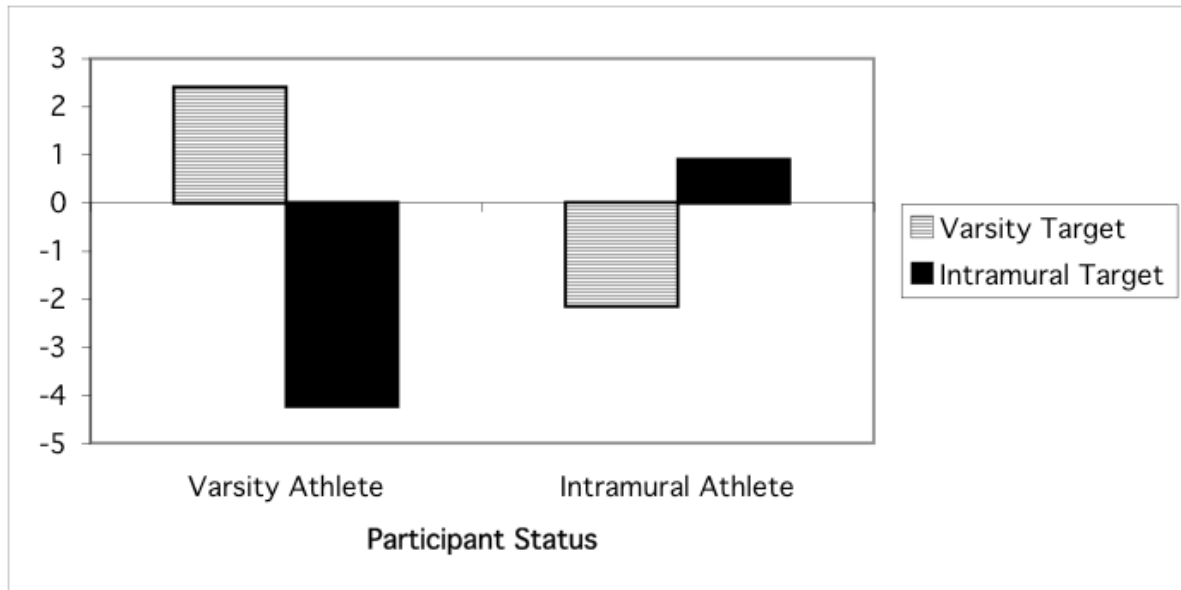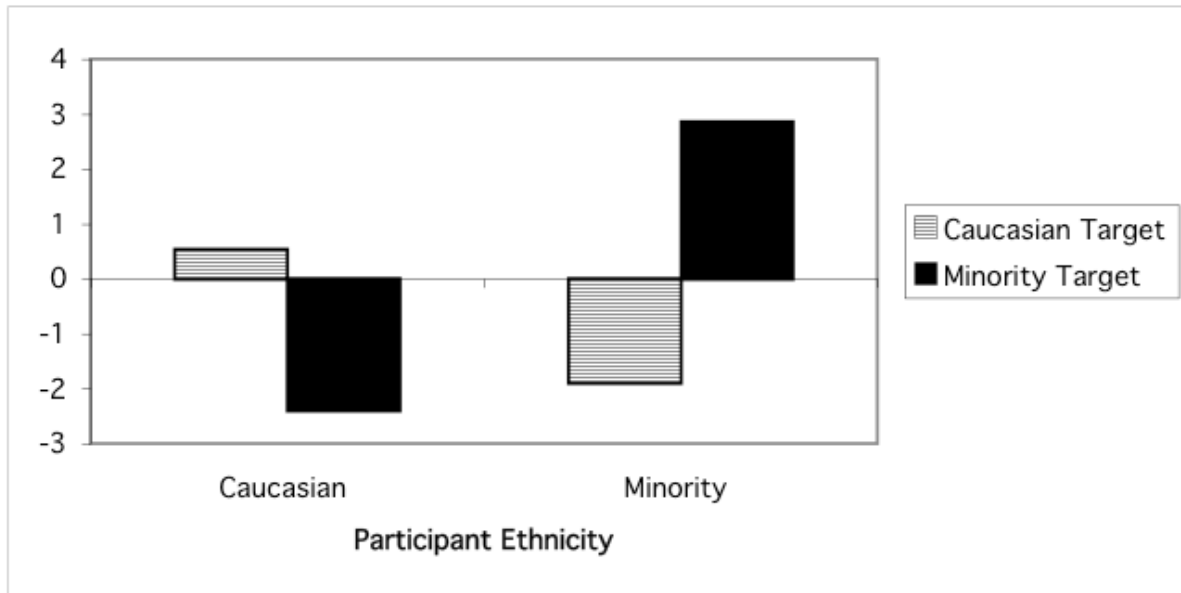
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