

Countries across the globe are paralyzed by intergroup conflict and inequality. Whether driven by racial tensions, religious disagreement, or political polarization, understanding the mechanisms that drive intergroup conflict and inequality are critical to reducing it. Thus, in my research program, I isolate the mechanisms that contribute to intergroup conflict to elucidate the psychological barriers that make people resistant to attitude and behavior change. I then put this knowledge into practice by designing and testing theory-driven interventions. Specifically, I focus on two main areas, which I describe in detail below.

I. Understanding and Intervening on Inaccurate Meta-perceptions

Meta-perceptions, or how you think others view you or your group(s), are commonly used as a political tool to justify conflict and incite violence^{1,2}. For instance, my research reveals that both Democrats and Republicans equally dislike and dehumanize each other, and they think that the other side expresses at least twice as much prejudice and dehumanization against them as the other side does in reality³. These negative and biased meta-perceptions are particularly problematic as they predict increased support for policies that threaten democratic norms (such as increased gerrymandering and limiting First Amendment freedoms of outgroup partisans) as well as increased desire to socially distance from partisan outgroup members³. Similar patterns of results appear in my follow-up work identifying extremely biased and inaccurate meta-perceptions about how much out-partisans value democracy⁴. Likewise, my recent work, conducted while at the University of Utah, reveals that meta-perceptions are not just a United States-specific phenomenon, but rather inaccurate meta-perceptions exist among polarized groups around the world. I collected data about political and religious meta-perceptions from thirteen different nations around the globe (e.g., Colombia, South Korea, England, India, Nigeria), and I am currently working with graduate students to analyze the data. Our goal is to conduct cross-cultural comparisons of meta-perception accuracy and extremity and to assess whether these meta-perceptions predict key intergroup outcomes (i.e., support for violence, intergroup animosity, etc.).

Because meta-perceptions are often inaccurate and negative¹⁻⁴, they can be intervened on^{5,6}. In one project, I examined the effect of intergroup contact quality on meta-perceptions⁷. Cross-sectional, longitudinal, and quasi-experimental data from five countries revealed that increased positive contact (not frequency of contact) with outgroup members significantly reduces the extent to which individuals perceive meta-dehumanization from outgroup members. Collaborative research with the non-profit organization⁸ Soliya further revealed that a semester-long vicarious contact program between American students and Muslims students from the Middle East and North Africa successfully reduced Americans' negative meta-perceptions about Muslims.^{7,9} This suggests that contact quality not only affects meta-perceptions, but it can be a powerful intervention technique to reduce meta-dehumanization.

Despite the benefits of positive intergroup contact for meta-perception correction, it is often not a scalable intervention technique. Therefore, I assessed the efficacy of scalable media interventions to reduce inaccurate meta-perceptions. I partnered with professional documentary filmmakers to develop a media intervention to correct inaccurate meta-perceptions and reduce political polarization¹⁰. This intervention presents footage of real partisans reacting to findings from past work³ and makes clear how Americans tend to overestimate the extent to which partisans disagree with and dehumanize outgroup partisans. Assessments of this intervention revealed that this intervention successfully reduces partisan animosity, reduces anti-democratic attitudes, and reduces support for violence, as compared to a control and other similar interventions^{10,11}. While at the University of Utah, I have continued to test the efficacy of this intervention. I have worked

with scholars from across the globe to tailor this intervention to other political contexts, and we are currently planning to assess these adaptations with an intervention tournament¹².

In the future, I plan to build on the foundations of social psychological theory to understand how various psychological processes contribute to erroneous meta-perceptions. Specifically, I aim to investigate cross-cultural differences in meta-perceptions, examine how meta-perceptions can contribute to deleterious and violent intergroup interactions, explore the role that the media plays in meta-perception formation, and develop contextually sensitive interventions to counteract harmful meta-perceptions.

II. The Role of Misperceptions in Intergroup Conflict

Building on my meta-(mis)perception research, I also investigate and intervene on general misperceptions about others. Misperceptions have a powerful hold on peoples' cognitions and emotions¹³. It can motivate people to hate¹⁴, can be used to encourage fighting and persecution¹³, and can be used to justify discriminatory behaviors¹⁵. In my research, I examine the role of misperceptions in intergroup conflict, and specifically, how correcting misperceptions can improve intergroup relations.

My previous research in this area has focused on (1) understanding and intervening on misperceptions about undocumented immigrants¹⁴, religious groups¹⁶⁻¹⁸, and minoritized groups^{13,14,19-21}; and (2) developing large-scale “edutainment” interventions to correct misperceptions that contribute to animosity and violence in contexts of intractable conflict²². My work reveals how narratives can serve as a powerful intervention technique to increase prosocial behavior²³, but also how facts can play a crucial role in correcting misperceptions¹⁵.

My current work expands on these lines of research by focusing on how misperceptions can fuel and sustain intergroup conflict and violence. I recently designed a series of studies focused on identifying the key socio-psychological predictors of support for and engagement in political violence^{24,25}, and how misperceptions serve as a potential cause and consequence of violent conflict. Specifically, this past summer, I assessed these research questions with a field study in Nigeria's Plateau State and Kaduna, both regions with heightened intergroup conflict and violence between Muslim herder and indigenous Christian farmer communities. This project both built upon existing theory of the socio-psychological drivers of support for political violence and addressed a critical gap in the literature by assessing such drivers in a non-WEIRD context.

In another line of emerging research, I am designing a series of studies to examine social movement spill-over effects, or what causes people to express solidarity for certain causes/groups but not others. One potential predictor of (or lack of) spill-over support is misperceptions about the social group(s) involved in the social movements, which can lead to prejudice and discrimination against those involved in the movement. Therefore, I aim to implement misperception-correcting interventions to improve intergroup relations in these contexts.

In the future, I plan to continue to investigate the psychology behind common misperceptions and develop interventions to combat these misperceptions. Specifically, I aim to investigate what might orient people to be particularly susceptible to misperceptions and therefore, more likely to benefit from interventions.

In summary, I am committed to advancing theory while addressing major social problems. I am passionate about conducting research that is bidirectional in nature—researching how real-world experiences informs theory, and how psychological theory can address pressing social issues. I am dedicated to researching a diverse range of topics that all focus on the same central theme: identifying the causes and consequences of inequality and conflict and to develop interventions to improve intergroup relations.

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