

Study finds people are consistently and confidently wrong about those with opposing views

August 28 2024



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Despite being highly confident that they can understand the minds of people with opposing viewpoints, the assumptions humans make about

others are often wrong, according to new research from the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience (IoPPN) at King's College London, in partnership with the University of Oxford.

"Poorer representation of minds underpins less accurate mental state inference for out-groups" was [published](#) in *Scientific Reports*. The research explores the psychology behind why people come to the wrong conclusions about others, and suggests how society could start to change that.

In all, 256 participants were recruited from the U.S. and split evenly between those with left- and right-leaning political views. They were presented with various political statements (e.g. Immigrants are beneficial to society) and asked to rate on a 5-point scale how much they agreed with it (i.e. strongly agree to strongly disagree).

For each statement, the participant would then be presented with someone else's response to the same statement. If the two shared a similar opinion, they were deemed "in-group" to one another. If the two held different opinions, they were deemed "out-group" to each other.

The participant was then asked to predict the other person's response on a second statement (e.g. all women should have access to legal abortion), and to state their confidence in their answer, from "Not at all" to "Extremely."

Participants could then choose to receive up to five more of the other person's responses to different statements to help the participant build up a better idea—or "representation"—of the other person's mind. After receiving any further information, participants could update their initial prediction and reclarify their confidence on their final answer.

Analysis of the data found that, even though participants were prepared

to seek out as much—and often more—information about someone they disagreed with, their predictions were consistently incorrect, even after receiving further information about them.

Participants demonstrated a high degree of confidence in their answers, suggesting that participants thought they had a good understanding of the people in their out-group, despite this not being the case. In comparison, participants could consistently make accurate predictions about those in their in-group with less information.

"Our study shows that people have a good understanding of people who are similar to themselves and their confidence in their understanding is well-placed. However, our understanding of people with different views to our own is demonstrably poor. The more confident we are that we can understand them, the more likely it is that we are wrong. People have poor awareness of their inability to understand people that differ from themselves," says Dr. Bryony Payne.

"There are clear consequences to this lack of awareness, and we have seen countless real-world examples. The recent UK riots were borne out of a small group of people who were probably very confident in their (mis)understanding of the views and beliefs of Muslims and [asylum seekers](#), and these misconceptions are often fueled by disinformation on social media or echoed back to them by others within their in-group."

Dr. Caroline Catmur, Reader in Cognitive Psychology at King's IoPPN and the study's senior author, said, "We live in an increasingly polarized society and many people are very confident in their understanding of those who don't share their beliefs. However, our research shows that people are willing to reconsider once they are made aware of their mistakes.

"While there is no quick fix in a real-world setting, if everyone

interacted with a more diverse group of people, talked directly to them and got to know them, it's likely we would understand each other better. Conversations with people who hold different beliefs could help challenge our incorrect assumptions about each other."

More information: Bryony Payne et al, Poorer representation of minds underpins less accurate mental state inference for out-groups, *Scientific Reports* (2024). [DOI: 10.1038/s41598-024-67311-3](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-024-67311-3)

Provided by King's College London

Citation: Study finds people are consistently and confidently wrong about those with opposing views (2024, August 28) retrieved 28 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-08-people-confidently-wrong-opposing-views.html>

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