

Misperceptions About Others

Based on BFI Working Paper 2021-100, “[Misperceptions About Others](#),” by Leonardo Bursztyn, Professor in the Kenneth C. Griffin Department of Economics and the College, University of Chicago; and David Y. Yang, Harvard

Misperceptions about others are widespread, asymmetric, much larger when about out-group members, and positively associated with one’s own attitudes; also, experimental treatments to re-calibrate misperceptions generally work as intended.

Recent research has documented that, across societies, individuals widely misperceive what others think, what others do, and even who others are. This ranges from perceptions about the size of immigrant population in a society, to perceptions of partisans’ political opinions, to perceptions of the vaccination behaviors of others in the community.

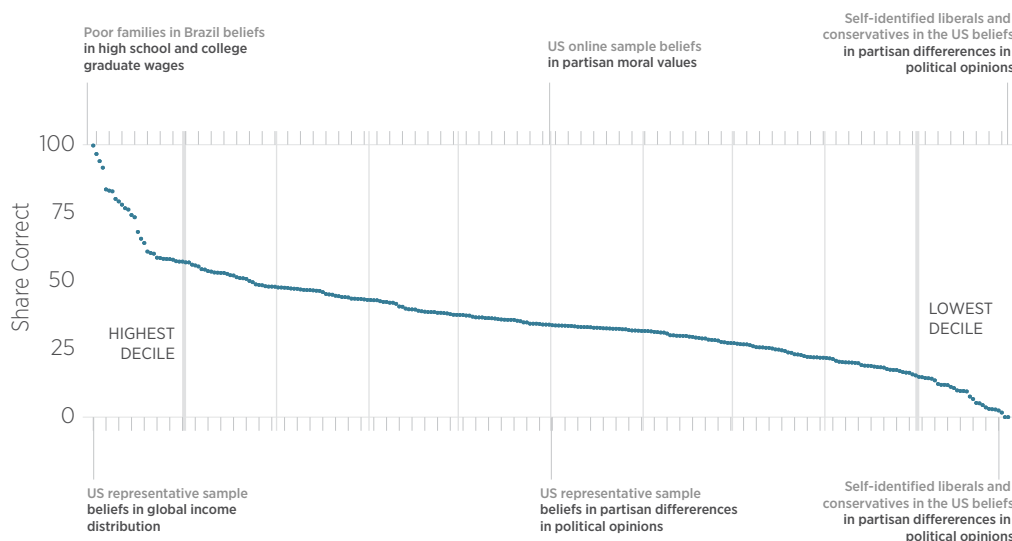
To synthesize this research, the authors conducted a meta-analysis of the recent empirical literature that examined (mis)perceptions about others in the field. The authors’ meta-analysis addresses such questions as: What do misperceptions about others typically look like? What happens if such misperceptions are re-calibrated?

The authors reviewed 79 papers published over the past 20 years, across a range of domains: economic topics, such as beliefs about others’ income; political topics, such as partisan beliefs; and social topics, such as beliefs on gender.

The authors establish several stylized facts (or widely consistent empirical findings), including the following:

- Misperceptions about others are widespread across domains, and they do not merely stem from measurement errors. This measure of misperceptions requires that perceptions about others are elicited, and the corresponding truth is known. The truth

Figure 1 • Distribution of Misperceptions across Papers



Note: This Figure presents the distribution of the share of respondents holding correct perceptions across the primary beliefs about others elicited in the 79 papers. (The authors measure misperceptions as the share of perceptions within 0.5 standard deviations of the truth. Vertical lines indicate deciles.) The papers (and their primary beliefs) are ordered in descending fashion with respect to the share of respondents holding correct perceptions about others. One can see that the misperceptions about others are prevalent and generally large in magnitudes. In only 20% of the beliefs, the share of respondents who hold correct perceptions about others (that is, within 0.5 standard deviation of the truth) exceeds 50%. In more than 30% of the beliefs, more than three quarters of the respondents hold beliefs that are at least 0.5 standard deviation away from the truth.

can be either of an objective or a subjective nature. For example, perceptions of a population's racial composition have an objective truth, that is, the population shares of each race groups as reported in census data. For perceptions of other people's opinions, the truth refers to the relevant populations' reported opinions (for example, the average level of the opinions). These requirements limit the perceptions included in the analyses to those with a measurable and measured truth. (See accompanying Figure.)

- Misperceptions about others are very asymmetric; in other words, beliefs are disproportionately concentrated on one side relative to the truth. The authors ask: Are incorrect beliefs that constitute the misperceptions about others symmetrically distributed around the truth? They define asymmetry of misperceptions as the ratio between the share of respondents on one side of the truth and that on the other side, with the larger share always serving as the numerator and the smaller share as the denominator, regardless of whether the corresponding beliefs are underestimating or overestimating the truth. Thus, a ratio of 1 indicates exact symmetry, and the higher the ratio, the larger is the underlying asymmetry. As the paper describes in detail, overall misperceptions about others are asymmetrically distributed, and such asymmetry is large in magnitude.
- Misperceptions regarding in-group members are substantially smaller than those regarding out-group members. The authors find that among more than half of the belief dimensions, more respondents hold correct beliefs about their in-group members than about out-group members. Moreover, beliefs about out-group members tend to exhibit greater spread across respondents than that about in-group members, suggesting that perceptions about in-group members are not only more accurately calibrated on average, but also more tightly

calibrated around the truth. Also, the authors find that perceptions about in-group members are much more symmetrically distributed around the truth than that about out-group members.

- One's own attitudes and beliefs are strongly, positively associated with (mis)perceptions about others' attitudes and beliefs on the same issues. Respondents overwhelmingly tend to think that other in-group members share their characteristics, attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors, while those in the out-groups are opposite of themselves.
- Experimental treatments to re-calibrate misperceptions generally work as intended. The authors find that treatments which are qualitative and narrative in nature tend to have larger effects on correcting misperceptions. Also, while some treatments lead to important changes in behaviors, large changes in behaviors often only occur in studies that examine behavioral adjustments immediately after the interventions, suggesting a potential rigidity in the mapping between misperceptions and some behaviors. For example, even though stated beliefs may have changed, the deeper underlying drivers of behavior have not. In practice, this could mean that correcting for one misperception (for example, immigrants "steal"), may not negate all negative views (immigrants "steal" jobs).

The authors stress that many open questions remain in this field of research, including how to identify sources of misperceptions, how to successfully attempt recalibration, and how to account for the welfare implications of misperceptions and their corrections.

READ THE WORKING PAPER

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ABOUT OUR SCHOLARS



Leonardo Bursztyn

Professor in the Kenneth C. Griffin Department of Economics and the College

economics.uchicago.edu/directory/leonardo-bursztyn



Written by David Fettig, BFI Senior Writer and Editor