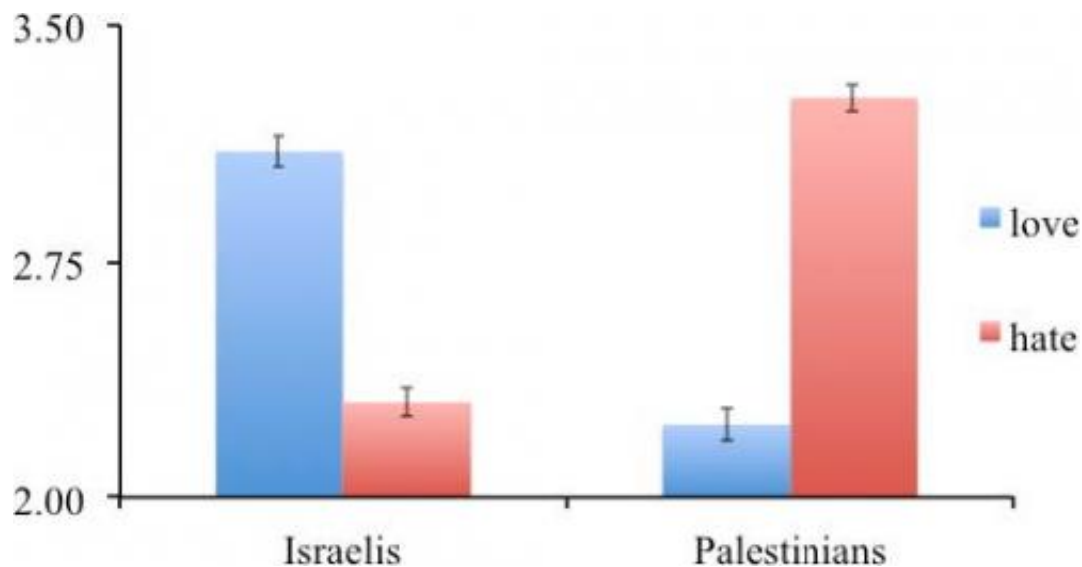


Studies suggest participants in group conflicts misunderstand opponent's motives

October 21 2014, by Bob Yirka



Israelis' attribution of love and hate to Israelis and Palestinians. Credit: PNAS

(Medical Xpress)—A trio of researchers, Adam Waytz, Liane Young and Jeremy Ginge, has conducted several studies to better understand why it is that opposing groups find it so difficult to compromise to end a conflict. As they explain in their paper published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* their studies show that not only do members of opposing groups misunderstand their opponents' motives, but their perception can be altered by offering a simple reward.

People who are not engaged in a conflict between two groups tend to

scratch their heads wondering why the two can't find a way to settle their differences. In this new study, the researchers sought to better understand what drives such conflicts and even tested a possible solution.

The researches started with an obvious test [group](#), interviewing 1266 Palestinians, and 995 Israelis regarding their motives in the age-old conflict between the two groups. The data showed that on average both sides tended to believe their side fought out of love for people on their side and that those on the opposing side fought out of hatred for their enemy—a clear contradiction.

The research trio conducted another similar study with the same two groups of people where the questions were rephrased in a way that helped reveal why both sides felt compelled to continue fighting with their opponents. That study revealed a deep pessimism about the possibility of a resolution. The two ingredients, the researchers claim, set the stage for a never-ending conflict.

In another study, the researchers sought to find out if it might be possible to cause members of opposing groups to see the real motives of their opponents by some means—they chose monetary reward. This time the participants were Republicans and Democrats in the U.S. Volunteers were interviewed regarding their motives and how they felt about people on the other side. Next they asked the volunteers to detail how they thought members of the opposite side would describe their own [motives](#) and were given a small monetary reward when there was a match with the opponent's average response. The researchers found that by doing so, the volunteers expressed more optimism regarding the possibility of reconciliation between the opposing groups.

The researchers suggest further study may reveal a means of causing similar sorts of changes to perception in members of groups in conflicts, helping to stop long drawn-out conflicts that appear to offer no

advantages to either side.

More information: Motive attribution asymmetry for love vs. hate drives intractable conflict, *PNAS*, Adam Waytz, [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1414146111](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1414146111)

Abstract

Five studies across cultures involving 661 American Democrats and Republicans, 995 Israelis, and 1,266 Palestinians provide previously unidentified evidence of a fundamental bias, what we term the "motive attribution asymmetry," driving seemingly intractable human conflict. These studies show that in political and ethnoreligious intergroup conflict, adversaries tend to attribute their own group's aggression to ingroup love more than outgroup hate and to attribute their outgroup's aggression to outgroup hate more than ingroup love. Study 1 demonstrates that American Democrats and Republicans attribute their own party's involvement in conflict to ingroup love more than outgroup hate but attribute the opposing party's involvement to outgroup hate more than ingroup love. Studies 2 and 3 demonstrate this biased attributional pattern for Israelis and Palestinians evaluating their own group and the opposing group's involvement in the current regional conflict. Study 4 demonstrates in an Israeli population that this bias increases beliefs and intentions associated with conflict intractability toward Palestinians. Finally, study 5 demonstrates, in the context of American political conflict, that offering Democrats and Republicans financial incentives for accuracy in evaluating the opposing party can mitigate this bias and its consequences. Although people find it difficult to explain their adversaries' actions in terms of love and affiliation, we suggest that recognizing this attributional bias and how to reduce it can contribute to reducing human conflict on a global scale.

[Press release](#)

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