THE POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE FUNCTIONS OF PERCEPTUAL BIAS IN INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT. Perceptual biases about the self and our human relations are not only a natural facet of the human condition but they also fulfil several important functions. Biases help to relieve feelings of uncertainty and support the sense of self-esteem and social status. They are also instrumental in formulating the myths that give meaning to our existence, in the subjective construction of our identity and how we present ourselves to the outside world. The article describes situations in which both positive and negative bias may function both positively or negatively. It advises the reader to recognize situations where being good is bad, compliments do harm and where distrust and disregard can be positive.

Key words: perceptual bias, moral relativism, social constructivism, interpersonal communication, 'sick soul', William James.

As human beings we tend to be subjectively biased in our evaluations about ourselves and about the relationships we take part in. This paper maps the ways in which positive and negative biases function in interpersonal relationships and describes the situations when both positive and negative biases can function in positive and negative ways. In general, perceptual biases about the self and human relations are a natural facet of the human condition. If we are able to accurately recognize our authentic biases we may gain better insight into ourselves. Correspondingly, this paper does not call upon anyone to *avoid* biases in their relations or to evaluate ourselves in our biases according to some version of objective moral norms. It attempts, instead, to identify situations in which the biases may become disproportionate and counterproductive.

The main practical purpose is to recognize how the biases function in us and in people we communicate with, to understand how we function in relationships, what happens in ourselves and what we can reasonably expect from others.

We are able to be empathetic, to be concerned about public good and global justice, but this does not adequately describe *who we are*. I can love animals,

but I am still not an animal. When I envy the happiness of a Bushman the envy is mine but happiness belongs to the Bushman.

Thus, we *are* emotional, self-interested and subjective beings. Those individuals we communicate with are like us. The recognition of inevitable biases in our perceptions enables us to understand how we as humans relate to each other. When we recognize the existence of emotional biases within us we should not be afraid this might become a moral disadvantage against our opponents. Unless we try to suppress and synchronize our biases with a particular version of objective and absolute moral standards, we will not be disadvantaged. We are all biased and subjective.

In human relations we need moral norms and related mutual expectations. Kant's *maxims*, *the Golden Rule* of Christ or Aristotelian virtue ethics, however, do not adequately describe me and you. We may succeed in promoting a certain version of justice in a particular community by using slogans like "all men are created equal" or promoting human rights with the axiom that "all men are born free" but these abstract ideals do not say a word about our nature, how we perceive the world and behave in concrete interpersonal situations.

We can become dysfunctional if we try to behave like saints in the company of common mortals, start to evaluate ourselves according to divine standards or assume that we are communicating with angels.

To be biased is to be human. It is normal to be biased. Anybody – both good and bad – is biased. Taking any objective and absolute moral norms too seriously can seriously distort our image of human nature.

I do assume that passions and emotions function similarly in all of us. In this approach I follow Thomas Hobbes who also assumes in the introductory passages of his book "Leviathan" (1651) that emotions and passions function in a similar way in all human beings. In this way, by getting to know ourselves we learn to know all others:

> But there is another saying not of late understood, by which they might learn truly to read one another, if they would take the pains; and that is, *Nosce teipsum*, *Read thy self*: /.../ for the similitude of the thoughts, and Passions of one man, to the thoughts, and Passions of another, whosoever looketh into himself, and considereth what he doth, when he does *think*, *opine*, *reason*, *hope*, *feare*, etc., and upon what grounds; he shall thereby read and know, what are the thoughts, and Passions of all other men, upon the like occasions. I say the similitude of Passions, which are the same in all men...[1]

Bias in our perceptions, behavior and understanding refers to the extent to which our evaluations lack an objective basis. As far as our subjective

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[1]   **Thomas Hobbes.** Leviathan: Or, the Matter, Forme & Power of a Commonwealth, Ecclesiasticall and Civill. R. Waller (ed.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1904, p. xix.

perceptions and emotions are not biased they are accurate. Due to self-interest, partiality and subjectivity our emotional evaluations can usually only be more or less objective and accurate but not absolutely so. Thus we may recognize our biases more or less accurately as we may sense our subjectivity also more or less objectively.

In an ideal – reasonable, objective and impartial – world all individuals, groups and cultures may be empirically and should be normatively equal. In the real world we may believe that to be an Arab in Arab culture is as normal as it is to be a Pole in Poland. In an ideal world, to be a Muslim Arab in Poland is as normal as it is to be a Catholic Pole in Saudi Arabia. Ideally, the cultures may rationally be considered as being equal because, were we all without bias, prejudice and partiality, it would be an extremely demanding task for us to demonstrate objectively how and why certain types of individuals, cultures or societies could ever be inherently superior and better than others.

It sounds politically correct and right to claim "All individuals are as worthy and good as I am." Even if I were to take such a belief seriously I would never be able – or completely willing – to live accordingly. In real life individuals are not born equal, do not live equal, do not die equal and are even posthumously unequal. We may believe in human equality that says we are equals in birth, life and death. Because of a shared belief in human equality we may consider present society to be an unprecedentedly good one. This belief, however, is also a metaphor, a functional myth, not a description of reality. Groups within a society are never equal – there are always those who are marginal and excluded, those whose needs are not recognized and whose voices are not heard. We may cherish religious freedom as a universal right but, again, religious choices are never culturally equal.[2]

Perhaps we talk more about equality than live up to it. Perhaps we cheat because we do not even want the world to be equal. Maybe increasing equality makes us feel uncertain and vulnerable. Maybe we are subjective creatures. Maybe we – at least sometimes, in our own society, neighborhood, circles of fellowship, or in the supermarket – even enjoy being unequal. Maybe we celebrate when our compatriots win competitions and see no reason for celebration if the Nobel Prize goes to someone from distant culture. Maybe we want our little world, our groups and relationships to be superior. Maybe that way we feel ourselves truly human.

On the other hand, we know from history that interpersonal biases may also become extreme, harmful and dangerous. *A posteriori* we know that the crime has been done. But *a priori* in our present relationships it is often almost impossible to determine exactly when the excessive negative bias starts or to

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[2]   For ethnic Estonians, the conversion to Islam involves considerably higher costs in a secular and traditionally Lutheran Estonian culture than conversion to Methodism, Baptism or Catholicism.

differentiate the victim from the perpetrator due to partiality in our percep-
tions and the subjectivity of the conflicting parties' experiences. Where we
find unfounded bias materialized in a certain form of behavior we then use
the term 'discrimination'. When bias manifests itself in unfounded attitudes
we call it 'prejudice'. Where bias produces unfounded cognitive images we
call these 'stereotypes'.[3] A good deal of cognitive practice with such labels
may make us believe that the real world *could exist without harmful biases.*
It is highly likely that the attitudes and perceptions about what is considered
harmful will change. Biases themselves, however, will still be present.

The ideas and beliefs about social justice and equality have recently
changed enormously. In the contemporary world we agree that slavery and
racism cannot be legitimate. Several centuries ago, however, racism and
slavery were normal and legitimate in all corners of the world to the extent
that individuals in disagreement with the social inequalities due to skin color
or birth were suffering from an "inaccurate" perception of their social posi-
tion. Half a century ago a great many people believed in Communist ideals of
equality. Today most of us consider Communist regimes as empirical failures.
Some of us consider Communism as essentially a bad idea. Similarly, it is
highly likely that future generations will reinterpret and reassess some of our
present perceptions of inter-human justice and equality.

We are not absolutely certain that the norms and values we consider uni-
versal, timeless and objective actually are what we believe them to be. We
lack consensus about whether such universal values exist at all. What we can
be certain of, however, is that in our current daily interactions some degree of
objectivity in our perceptions is always lacking. We usually evaluate ourselves
with a positive bias and sometimes we construct negatively-biased images of
those whose existence, ideas or attitudes undermine our sense of security,
self-worth and self-esteem.

I assume that the present definitions of 'good' and 'bad' behavior, 'good'
and 'bad' people, are social constructions. I subjectively believe this approach
accurately explains why moral norms vary and how they have emerged and
changed in human associations, cultures and societies. Ideas, behaviors, indi-
viduals, cultures and groups are not objectively good or bad but are so defined
because social actors have constructed them as such. At the same time, I am
not advocating nihilism (the absence of any moral norms). What functions as
a self-evident moral norm in a particular moral community (for example, in
the Catholic Church) or in a political society exists "as if" it is objective for
the members of the respective communities. Anything beyond that inevitably
opens the doors to abstract reasoning.

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[3] **Miles Hewstone, Mark Rubin, Hazel Willis.** Intergroup bias. – Annual Review of
Psychology, 2002**,** p. 575.

I could try to identify a certain pattern of fundamental values and principles that most societies usually acknowledge, such as "do not kill" and "do not lie". Irrespective of whether any particular society might be Christian, Fascist, Communist or Liberal Democrat, in one way or another they all socialize their common citizens to be loyal to that form of government, to accept the public order, to be law-abiding and willing to contribute to the public good. Good Christian, good Soviet and competent democratic citizens are all expected to be emotionally positively biased towards their present society. Their emotional socialization contributes to the bias towards some version of deontological morals instead of instrumental ethics. Irrespective of whether the moral norms of the common people are explained by a supernatural God's will, scientific materialism or universal human rights – common members of society are always expected to be loyal and committed to contributing to the public good. They should live "as if" there are objective moral norms to which they have to conform. If they do not they are in danger of exclusion from the community of the 'good'.

Thus the idea of who is considered good, included and part of the social mainstream and, conversely, who is considered evil, excluded, marginal or 'other' is socially constructed. Correspondingly, not only do we use moral concepts for evaluation from a subjective perspective, we may harbor negative prejudices against certain groups of people because they are negatively defined within our present culture.

As individuals we do not exist in isolation, as persons *per se* we do not exist before and outside of communication with other people. We do not even exist as persons *first* who only thereafter express and present themselves to the surrounding world. Instead, our self-identity and self-consciousness emerge on the basis of communication with others. As Peter L. Berger claimed, from the moment a human individual becomes conscious of self he or she is in a relationship with other people. Thereafter, the relationship between an individual and society is dialectic in nature.[4] Thus the beginning and the development of the perception of ourselves as people is preconditioned by our relationships to other individuals and society.

In order to communicate with other individuals we need words and language. On the one hand we need language in order to understand each other, but on the other hand we *learn to think* only as far as we have learned to *communicate with other people*. Our capacity of internal reasoning is the result of acquired capabilities of interpersonal communication. Correspondingly, even our capacity for individual thought results from our social interactions.

Moreover, our self-perception is based on comparison with others. Without comparisons (between individuals, groups, cultures, societies, etc.) the

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[4]   **Peter L. Berger.** The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1967, p. 4.

notions of 'good', 'foolish', 'civilized', 'primitive', and so forth, would have no meaning. We acquire conceptions of ourselves and others during socialization. In comparison with small children, adults are more self-conscious because they have practiced comparative representations of self and others over a substantially longer period of time. In real-life situations they have learned to perceive themselves in relation to others according to a particular pattern ("I am active, attractive and ambitious", "I have low self-esteem, I am an empathic team-worker, I am a self-critical introvert, humble and really decent person").

The positive and negative nature of present self-perceptions depends largely on previous interpersonal experiences. Once the pattern of self-image starts to accumulate on the negative side it becomes increasingly difficult not to respond to emerging situations in ways outside of the acquired self-image. Changes in self-image are possible but are most likely to be evolutionary, not revolutionary. In order to improve one's psychologically, emotionally and cognitively-internalized, habitual self-perception one can usually only make relatively small changes in thought and behaviour at a time. Thereafter, if one consistently follows these new patterns of interpersonal behaviour for a sufficient period of time a slightly changed self-image becomes habitually internalized. After success with the first step one can take another small step forward.

Thus, we attain our self-consciousness through human relations. Our self-esteem, consciousness of social status, dignity and security are dependent upon our relations with others.

We all have the instinct of self-preservation. We all want to feel psychologically secure and safe. We want to have relationships that nourish our self-esteem and fulfill our need of love. We choose relationships and associations for that purpose, we are conscious about group identities that help us build up a more secure sense of self. Some of us may have a weaker individual sense of self-certainty, be more responsive to social context and more dependent on groups and relationships in our secure sense of identity. Internally uncertain individuals can join with strict groups – i.e., groups, where the level of certainty is high – more easily because in that case identification with the group can reduce uncertainty by strengthening the sense of "who we are, how we should behave, and how others will treat us"[5].

We respond differently to challenges depending on whether we perceive the situation to be under our own control or if we need the help of God or a particular group. For some of us challenges are exciting, the search for solutions and coping with challenges may yield satisfaction and an increase in

[5] **Michael A. Hogg, Janice R. Adelman, Robert D. Blagg.** Religion in the Face of Uncertainty: An Uncertainty-Identity Theory Account of Religiousness. – Personality and Social Psychology Review, 1/2010, p. 74.

self-confidence. Others experience stress, feel powerless as if they have lost control over the world and life. Whether the challenge is a danger and brings along passivity and withdrawal or whether it is an opportunity depends on whether we feel our resources to be sufficient for coping with it.[6] None of us can live a normal life with a continuous sense of insecurity and a strong feeling that we are in a vulnerable situation. We devote our cognitive energy to issues that matter to us, that touch us personally.[7] In order to reduce insecurity in human relations we may try to increase consistency and psychological stability.[8] We may choose which relationships to exclude and which to nourish.

Our emotional capacities differ in the ways in which we cope with internal insecurities and vulnerabilities. Yet we all are biased for three main reasons.

General reasons for bias

1. To reduce the feeling of uncertainty. Every individual experiences feelings of uncertainty and chaos at certain stages of life. The uncertainty may be related to moral values, a sense of racial, national, ethnic, cultural, gender or sexual identity, or socioeconomic status.

According to Peter L. Berger, human beings are social creatures who are by nature inclined to construct a social world.[9] In order to cope with uncertainties people create a social world which, to a significant degree, replaces uncertainty with predictability and chaos with order. Real-life situations are significantly chaotic and unpredictable and can never be completely controlled by humans, but in order to feel safe and secure we as humans need a faith and perception that things are meaningfully under our control, that our status and position in society are sufficiently secure and that meaninglessness is sufficiently under our control too. Thus, we construct certainty, order and meaning where we find it lacking. Life and existence would be unbearable if we did not construct some kind of *meaning* to it. We strive to make the world more predictable and "our own behavior within it more efficacious"[10].

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[6]   **Hogg, Adelman, Blagg** 2010, p. 73.

[7]   *Ibid*., p. 73.

[8]   **Jeffrey R. Seul.** Ours is the way of God: Religion, Identity, and Intergroup Conflict. – Journal of Peace Research, 5/1999, p. 555.

[9]   **Berger** 1967, pp. 6, 8.

[10] **Hogg, Adelman, Blagg** 2010, p. 73.

2. To enhance self-esteem. We define ourselves in and by our positive and negative relationships with other individuals and groups.[11] For establishing positive self-esteem we do not only need positive social relations, but sometimes also intergroup prejudices.[12] Correspondingly, at times it may be useful for us to be pejorative towards people who objectively have not deserved it. And vice versa, when we ourselves experience injustice and discrimination we may be deeply touched and feel a compelling need to cope with it. In principle, we feel the need to eliminate the unjust situation. We may resist, rebel, transform the situation or transform ourselves. For example, we may re-interpret our suffering as good and try to restore our sense of dignity even when we remain humiliated.

3. To construct meaning. Human existence and existential experiences do not have objective and rational meanings. If we try to reason things out rationally, our existence does not have any given meaning. We are not irreplaceable – social life existed before we were born and will continue after our death. After our departure the places and roles which we filled will soon be filled by others. We may gather thousands of photos of ourselves "for our grandchildren", yet our offspring will not remember us any more than we remember our grandparents. Maybe the most rational and objective perception of life is to acknowledge its meaninglessness, but we just cannot live like that.

If we pose a rational research question: "Does life have any meaning at all?" we could reasonably conclude that riches, fame, youth, and health vanish; even good things like love and pleasure are accompanied by pain and disappointments and nothing remains.[13] Instead, we formulate our research question as follows: "*What* meaning does my life have?" Life has to have meaning even when it has none. We just need to attach positive and negative meanings to ourselves, to our experiences, and to our relationships:

> "We need to know who we are and how to behave and what to think, who others are and how they might behave and what they might think, and how we fit into a predictable social, physical, and … existential universe."[14]

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[11] **Herbert C. Kelman.** Interests, Relationships, Identities: Three Central Issues for Individuals and Groups in Negotiating Their Social Environment. – Annual Review of Psychology, 2006, pp. 3–4.

[12] **Hewstone, Rubin, Willis** 2002. **Ole Waever, Barry Buzan, Morten Kelstrup, Lemaitre Pierre**. Identity, Migration and The New Security Agenda in Europe. London: Pinter Publishers, 1993.

[13] **William James**. Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature. London: Routledge, 2002, p. 112.

[14] **Hogg, Adelman, Blagg** 2010, p. 73.

To sum up, as individuals, groups, cultures and communities we need myths that give meaning to our existence. These myths – such as "the world is a better place because I realize my professional mission", "life in my society is better than in previous societies" – are not 'false consciousness' or distorted views of reality without which individual and communal existence would be better. Quite the opposite, without such biases our interpersonal relations cannot effectively function.

In the following section four functions of biases are delineated which may exist in individuals and groups in all possible combinations. As humans, we are capable of harboring positive and negative biases selectively and simultaneously. Our biases are also dynamic in nature – the same groups and individuals we perceive negatively today we may have liked yesterday. By the same token, our present opponents may become our allies tomorrow.

Positive function of positive bias

Whether positive bias fulfils a positive function depends on whether the bias is suitable for the situation at hand. For example, we usually believe that it is good to trust "most other people" but such attitudinally positive bias towards strangers may at times yield unhealthy consequences. Principled realism and rational skepticism also may have negative outcomes. Therefore, the relevant question is: *"When* does positive bias function positively?"

Our self-esteem and our sense of social status – as individuals, groups and members of society – is based to a significant degree on positive bias.[15] To be positively biased towards oneself is neither immoral nor bad. In contrast, to be absolutely honest, objective and self-critical can become harmful and depressing. We do not need to live like angels because we are not angels and we do not live in the commonwealth of angels. Real individuals can never be perfectly objective, absolutely separated from subjective interests and personal perspectives.

Often we may hear public exhortations for members of the community to be more honest, more altruistic (to volunteer and participate in civil associations), more empathetic (to spend more time with their children, to visit parents more often, to care more about the marginal, powerless and needy). It sounds so good, but there are several serious faults with such moral exhortations.

Firstly, they measure human performance against standards which are sufficiently vague and ambiguous to be easily manipulated by the socially privileged who, themselves, would hardly succeed in their leadership duties and political and economic ventures if they were seriously following such moral norms.

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[15] **Hewstone, Rubin, Willis** 2002, p. 580.

Secondly, those among the common people who do take such norms seriously and attempt to live by these standards will most likely stagnate in their careers, suffer failures in interpersonal relations and consequently feel subjectively inadequate as people.

Thirdly, nobody's prime duty is to be concerned for somebody else first. It is life-affirming to treat yourself well first, to be good towards yourself first, to live first for yourself, to seek your own happiness first, to mind your own business, interests and needs first, to fulfil your own mission, goal and purpose in life and not anybody else's. To prefer myself is human. It is human also to prefer the groups to which I belong, the associations in which I am active and to prefer my friends to strangers.

Accordingly, it is natural to be positively biased towards the groups where I belong. If I do not like the group, if I have negative perceptions regarding the group, my sense of identity – and most likely also self-esteem – will be weakened by participation in that group. Thus it is natural to want to belong to groups which I consider to be better than other groups, which strengthen my self-identity and bolster my self-esteem.[16]

If somebody else defines my identity ("who I am") and which relationships and behaviors are good for me, if the definition of my self-identity and self-certainty is dependent on the will and evaluation of somebody else, then I am at somebody else's mercy. Obviously, human relations and group identities mold my identity, and there are structural identities I almost cannot change (such as racial, gender, and ethnic identities), but at the same time I also partake in the construction of my own identity.[17] I am the one who chooses groups and relationships where I belong. I construct my world and the world constructs me. I construct my identity by choosing the groups and ideas which will mold my identity.

What we consider ourselves to be is our construction in relation to what we "want to be" (our future aspirations) and to what we "want to have been" (the images from the past that contribute to our present definition of self and future goals).

There are many ways in which we can deal with our own past and that of our ancestors. We choose elements that can realistically be found from our past. But as we cannot choose everything that can be found we inevitably *have to choose and select* the experiences which we emphasize as important. We also determine elements which are to be neglected. We may also reinterpret particular past negative experiences as positive or formulate myths

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[16] **Kristen Renwick Monroe, Maria Luisa Martinez-Martí.** Empathy, Prejudice, and Fostering Tolerance. – Political Science & Politics, 4/2008, p. 858.

[17] I can stop identifying myself culturally or politically as an Estonian. However, 'Estonianness' will remain part of my reality to the extent that other people around me still identify me as an Estonian.

and narratives about ourselves which may not be very close to the life we have actually been living up to now.

It seems to me that it is a general human condition to construct an image and identity of self in this way. People always tend to choose elements that contribute to their present self-definition and their future goals. Cultural conventions about the extent to which individuals are free to formulate positive presentations of self may be markedly different. In contemporary liberal societies which place a high value on self-expression, authenticity, autonomy and self-centeredness, a positively-biased presentation of self, are conventionally accepted. Thus, we are even expected to describe our character traits in CVs with concepts like "industrious", "helpful", "excellent team-worker", "self-confident" and "ambitious".

Recent changes in the means of interpersonal communication have also influenced patterns of presentation of self to the public. Social networks (such as Facebook) allow a constructionist presentation of "self" unprecedented in previous human history. It has introduced new digital methods for how the self can be presented, it has extended the conventions of the morally-appropriate ways in which the "self" can be marketed, advertised and branded and it has opened up access to the competitive market of groups and individuals for an unprecedented number of individuals. Increasing participation in social networks has also increased the potential "audience" to whom individuals knowingly or unknowingly present themselves.

Partners in well-functioning romantic relationships usually have a *strongly* positive bias in their evaluations about each other's personalities, interests, goals and accomplishments. Precisely due to mutual positive bias, they feel good to be in such a relationship, they are more ready to commit, they feel greater satisfaction, mutual trust and love and their conflicts and differences are easier to solve.[18]

In a study conducted by Faby Gagné and John Lydon, 95% of respondents evaluated their partner as being more intelligent, charming, warm and humorous than the average dating man and woman.[19] As such a high proportion of individuals cannot objectively be better than average, it is obvious that individuals tend to be *positively* biased towards their partners and/or negatively biased towards all the remaining individuals who are dating.

As a rule, personal differences alienate and similarities attract. For example, positive romantic feelings usually start with the perception that the other person thinks and understands life the way we do. This feeling of similarity strengthens our self-identity and self-esteem as a person and raises our motivation of self-actualization. At some point in time, at least in cases where

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[18]   **Faby M. Gagné, John E. Lydon.** Bias and Accuracy in Close Relationships: An Integrative Review. – Personality and Social Psychology Review, 4/2004, p. 322.

[19]   **Gagné, Lydon** 2004, p. 324.

both partners express their personalities and feelings, some differences of interest, understanding, worldview, hobbies or preferences inevitably emerge too. Almost automatically, the potential strength of a partnership is tested when the contradicting feelings of both personalities authentically meet.

In principle, the relationship can function if each partner does not have shared religious beliefs, professional interests, worldviews, hobbies, friends, social backgrounds and status, education or equal success in their professional careers. Such a relationship can function, but it demands much more effort. As a rule, the feeling that the partner is like me, forming a good team, is the basis for positive self-esteem (positive bias towards oneself) and positive bias toward the close relationship.[20]

Positive function of negative bias

Negative emotions and bias are as normal a part of human life as positive ones. As mentioned above, we have positive emotions regarding relations with individuals and groups who enhance our self-esteem and contribute to our self-actualization, helping us to give meaning to the human world and to construct a reliable moral worldview.

Similarly, we also have negative emotions and biases regarding interpersonal relations. An autonomous individual can freely choose individuals and groups he or she wants to be in relationship and which to avoid – to ignore their concerns, to exclude them from networks in Facebook or to exclude them from any form of relationship. In order to have healthy relationships, people should also be capable of distrust and of avoiding unwanted communication, fellowship and partnership. If a person is interested in golf, the stock market and Machiavellian philosophy his or her integrity and authentic personality would be harmed if, in trying to conform to the role of a "decent person", he or she becomes a member of a chess club for celibate, wine-drinking clergy, unless he or she wants it emotionally.

New digital forms of interpersonal communication make us accessible to an increasing number of individuals, networks and groups. We should not forget, however, that we will only be "good" people if we fulfil our own unique mission – I encourage you to take this positively-biased positive myth about yourself seriously enough – and the latter often requires the ability to answer in the negative, to reject and to abandon. That is to say, in order to be true to ourselves in expressing our negative attitudes towards individuals and groups around us we need not be informed partakers in thousands of 'teams' formed around us. We need to communicate with the members in a team we prefer and with those who want to be in the same team as us.

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[20] *Ibid.*, p. 323.

Negative function of negative bias

Individuals who are psychologically capable of autonomous reasoning and behavior – often in contrast to the ideas, patterns and conventions followed by the majority – may be examples of positive deviances from the social mainstream despite having a critical attitude (negative bias) regarding social conventions. Accordingly, we can envision those individuals to be *both deviant* and *happy*. Unlike paranoiacs who also are negatively biased towards the external world, their mental sensors react mostly to negative external impulses and do not register any positive ones well.

Negative biases usually tend to function negatively. As negative bias tends by definition to exclude, the person who is purposefully self-centered, who is too engaged in excluding persons and relationships may end up in isolation and in loss of self-awareness (as the identity of self is based on human relationships).[21] And vice versa, to be "excluded" by all or most of those around us, can hardly be considered as good.

There is also a particular kind of psychological response to the external world which perceives the world accurately but may start to function negatively due to the lack of positive biases. The psychologist of religion, William James, talked about a 'sick soul' that perceives accurately the negative facets of human life such as the pain, the loss, the evil and the suffering.[22] James considered this realistic perception of parts of life as not contributing to vitality, self-actualization and personal success. Not surprisingly, James observed that most people would prefer *not to be 'sick'*, but *'healthy' souls*.[23]

A person with a 'sick soul' has an extraordinary ability to endure suffering for an extended period of time, to meditate continuously and systematically on evil and injustice in the human world, to be concerned about evil and to feel remorse over sin.[24] 'Sick souls' are able to stay stuck in remorse for sin, whereas a person with a 'healthy soul' just cannot bear the related emotions and thus has a strong motivation to act and move on. The 'sick soul' believes that the better it senses evil the better it understands the world.[25] The 'sick soul' neither escapes nor avoids the feelings of empathy, helplessness, pain

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[21] Emilé Durkheim has identified both excessive individualism (egoism) and insufficient individualism (altruism) as potential causes of suicide. Both egoism and altruism involves the loss of normal self-awareness. A self-centered egoist loses an ability to be aware of other persons and relationships, an other-centered altruist is not capable of being aware of his or her own self. **Emilé Durkheim.** Suicide. – Readings from Emile Durkheim. Kenneth Thompson (ed.) New York: Routledge, 2004, pp. 90–102.

[22] **Charles Taylor.** Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 33.

[23] **Taylor** 2002, p. 33.

[24] **James** 2002, pp. 103–131.

[25] *Ibid.*, pp. 103, 106.

and fear, and by abiding in these feelings gains deeper insight into and understanding of what it *means* to be in such situations.[26]

'Sick souls' can be those who take the suffering of other humans to heart, those who are constantly concerned about the millions who suffer due to domestic violence, human trafficking, slavery, starvation, who are raped and killed in conflicts and wars. 'Sick souls' may *perceive* social, physical, psychological and existential sufferings *more accurately* but the majority of human beings see no purpose in this or just do not want to take such emotional burdens onto their shoulders.

Negative function of positive bias

While a close relationship may be the source of supreme goodness in life due to the high level of interpersonal connectedness, it can also be a place where too much positivity may function negatively.

Firstly, culture always does influence the kinds of ideal conceptions and desired image we have regarding close relationships and how we measure their levels of satisfaction. In contemporary Western cultures close relationships are evaluated against very demanding ideals and expectations regarding physical beauty, sexual performance and social and economic status. As Roy Baumeister and Kathleen Vohs have noticed, in contemporary Western liberal societies partners base their evaluations of the relationship also on "… the sexual market, where the participants are partakers, and about their market value, as they themselves perceive it."[27] Excessively positive expectations may also seriously hinder the forming of close and lasting relationships.

Secondly, while the option of quitting a relationship simply for reasons like "I can do better on the dating market" or "It is not you, it is me" are legitimate for us today, in real-life situations, however, individuals may remain in relationships whose costs for them have long ago outweighed the benefits. Among many reasons why partners do not dissolve their relationship – like shared real estate property, bank loans, children and the like – it may also be that a dysfunctional *positive bias* hinders them. If their mutual feelings and relationship lack positive romantic biases then they may be *thinking more positively about the relationship* than it *actually merits.* They may believe in the *potential* of what the relationship could be – or what it was years ago – and are thus not able to recognize *what it actually is.*

In practice, it is hard to tell when relationships at the workplace, among friends or between partners in life are not working any more (are not

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[26] **Taylor** 2002, p. 34.

[27] **Roy F. Baumeister, Kathleen D. Vohs.** Sexual Economics: Sex as Female Resource for Social Exchange in Heterosexual Interactions. – Personality and Social Psychology Review, 4/2004, pp. 339–363.

accompanied by positive emotions) but in all cases where the relationships have become dysfunctional it is also dysfunctional to nourish positively-biased perceptions about them.

"I know you can dance like Shakira"

In a relationship that works well the idealization of a partner and a relation-ship contributes to the longevity of that relationship.[28] However, if the bias becomes excessive – if negative feedback is not considered at all or the posi-tive attitudes towards the partner become unrealistically optimistic – the *posi-tive* bias may become dysfunctional. Compliments like "I am convinced that you could sing and dance like Shakira (or Michael Jackson, if said to a man)" function most negatively in cases where the partner really believes in them, starts practicing dancing and singing and yet there is no realistic basis at all for such a positive comment.

Faby Gagne and John Lydon suggest that the best balance for couples would be a combination of positive bias together with realistic hopes and accurate feedback.[29]

Most people can be trusted and "want me good"

We are taught that good people are tolerant and trusting. Accordingly, we are also tempted to want to be good and virtuous individuals. We may "agree strongly" with the statement "most people can be trusted" that is presented in public surveys. In real-life situations the principled commitment to follow this kind of normative deontological attitude may become counterproductive and function negatively in many ways.

We may believe inaccurately that, regardless of the situation, we do make the right decisions by following some set of objective (absolute) moral standards. We may believe that we need to do what is right *rationally* and *universally* (in Kantian sense), *supernaturally* (what God said through Jesus Christ in the Sermon of the Mount, or what the laws of karma demand), or according to liberal humanism or virtue ethics. Whenever the main moral emphasis, if not the sole attention, is on the way *how we as individuals respond* and due attention is not given to what other individuals and groups do the resulting *positive bias* towards all other individuals functions negatively for several reasons.

Firstly, normative optimism or commitment to deontological ethics often only raises false hopes (i.e. hopes that, according to Winston Churchill's famous quotes, will "melt like snow" and "are soon to be swept away"). We may be fervent believers in non-violent conflict solution but we should

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[28] **Gagné, Lydon** 2004, p. 322.

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 323.

remember that even Mahatma Gandhi believed that morally wrong choices are those which do not actively oppose injustices in interpersonal relations. The passive acceptance of injustice – such as being empathetic, humble, altruistic, self-denying, ascetic – contributes to its solidification and advancement and usually displays a lack of moral courage, not its presence.[30]

Secondly, Gandhi also believed that the correct choice of behavior depends on the peculiarities of the situation and on the nature of the opponent. For example, Gandhi considered the situation of the Jews in the Second World War ghettos of Warsaw sufficiently exceptional and extreme to justify armed resistance by the Jews.

It is good if we are able to form and develop interpersonal relations based on trust and mutuality but we certainly do not need to demonstrate unqualified trust towards all strangers. In a real-life situation we do not need to have any particular general attitude to most other individuals living in the same neighborhood or society. We need to make sufficiently accurate evaluations and decisions about a limited number of relationships that are significant to us.

The reliance on objective and absolute moral standards becomes unhelpful when it does not allow us to react to the situation *as it is* and motivates us to react in the way *we want* the situation *to be*. When we are tempted to react to our enemies, competitors and those who want to enter into relationships with us that are not mutual, open and consensual *as if* they are our trustworthy friends and partners we should remember that it is not morally superior to play chess when our opponents play football or to try to be deontologically "good" (honest, open, polite, compassionate, altruistic, humble, team-spirited, working for the common good and the like) in a competitive or confrontational situation. If we still do so we are hypocrites, we cheat ourselves and soon find ourselves many steps behind those who realistically perceive what is going on. The latter may be less optimistic than we are but will be less depressed and more likely to survive and succeed in interpersonal relations.

Concluding remarks

We know the ideals. We talk about ideals. Sometimes we enthusiastically demand the observance of these ideals by others. But we follow these ideals only partially. We trust most "other people" yet want to have signed contracts and locks on the doors. The banks do not trust you and me with loans and we do not trust the good nature of those whom we elect to political office.

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[30]   The brief outline of Gandhi's ideas and practical suggestions are derived from the following book: **Mark Juergensmeyer.** Gandhi's way: a handbook of conflict resolution. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

We want to be sure how they will behave when the state budget and political power are at their disposal. For some reason we want laws to guard them.
We should love others like ourselves and attribute equal value and worth to other humans. We know we should. We know it is a nice idea.

We have a personality, emotions, experiences and yearnings all in ourselves and not in others. In our minds we are much closer to cherished (so-called "objective") ideals than we are in our deeds and emotions. We follow ideals selectively at best. We recognize from experience that others do the same.

In interpersonal relationships there is no objective truth to which all parties conform and by which they evaluate themselves.

Acknowledgements

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