

Pragmatic Empathy: New Ways of Understanding Rationality in Socio-Political Discourses

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Abstract

This article discusses drastic discrepancies in underlying assumptions that provide the foundations of different socio-political views and arguments presented by different members of the public in political discussions, as one of the key root causes of socio-political divisions in western societies. Through a multi-disciplinary lens, the underlying psychological processes behind political thoughts are studied, and based on this the limitations of rational behavior in socio-political encounters are defined. These insights are then used to create a new set of explicit “rules” for constructive socio-political discussions and the main obstacles towards a broad implementation of such “rules” are analyzed. The main goal behind this examination is to develop a practically applicable set of measures that can help to create a broad but clearly defined common ground within which, under obedience of its boundaries, constructive bi-partisan socio-political discussions can be held at the grassroots level. The central argument is that a practical, rather than purely moral understanding of empathy is the key to constructive discussions between individuals and groups with differing views and opinions. The systematic analysis of the underlying drivers of socio-political thoughts leads to the conclusion that “Pragmatic Empathy” can be taught and practiced in controlled and mediated environments, such as schools, universities and townhalls, and strengthened through the targeted application of encouraging psychological triggers, that increase the obedience of the rules of rational behavior in socio-political contexts and thus create new understandings of inclusive, rather than exclusive, socio-political identities.

Keywords: Political Discourse, Psychology, Social Sciences, Rationality, Identity Studies

1. Introduction

On David Letterman's talk show *My Next Guest Needs No Introduction*, Barack Obama said in 2018 that “one of the biggest challenges we have to our democracy is the degree to which we don't share a common baseline of facts”¹. A “common baseline of facts” would be the ideal foundation for any society to function. Unfortunately, as history has proven, the (grassroots) socio-political arena is a playing field governed by subjectivity, which often stands in the way of “common baselines of facts”.²

In times where political divisions have reached new extremes and societies in western democracies have drifted away from constructive political debates towards what often appears as irresolvable disputes, socio-political thinking and decision making requires a new form of critical reflection and empathy. Many democratic societies have been divided on topics such as the economy, climate, foreign policies, and many more.³ Most aspects related to these points of dispute can be scientifically assessed. However, even issues that can be measured through scientific examination, which would then also provide measures for improvement that can be statistically prioritized under consideration of the most relevant variables, still cause some of the most extreme disputes in the socio-political arenas of many societies.⁴ This article will argue that fundamental reasons for this paradox are, often strongly, differing underlying assumptions, which origins and relevance need to be understood in order to allow a broader discussion with a range individually rational arguments.

One of the main aspects that need to be considered here are the factors that contributed to the widening differences between underlying assumptions related to similar topics. This will not justify extreme views and undemocratic arguments but rather highlight the underlying interdisciplinary factors behind perspectives that have been neglected in academic discourses concerning socio-political divisions in recent years. In order to understand drastically differing opinions of members of the same society, a general workable foundational assumption should be that “almost everyone behaves rationally. If someone does something that appears irrational, it just means you don't have all the information.”⁵ Thus, for democratic societies to function prosperously at the grassroots level, we need to work towards a deeper and more reflective societal understanding of the rationality of the individual and the underlying assumptions that influence the formation of arguments (the “information”). This article will systematically break down the components that contribute to a broader understanding of the idea of rationality in socio-political discourses using tools from the academic fields of psychology, political sciences, sociology, and the study of rationality.

¹ D. LETTERMAN, “My Next Guest Needs No Introduction”, *Netflix*, 2018, 41-42min.

² For more information on the role of subjectivity in political behavior see: M. BASHOVSKI and N. ROSSI, “Introduction: political subjectivity in times of crisis”, *Globalizations*, 25 February, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2023.2186102>.

³ See for example: C. MILLER, “The economics of 5 big election issues”, *Brookings*, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2022/11/01/the-economics-of-5-big-election-issues/>, consulted on May 24, 2023.

⁴ One example would be the political divide on Climate Change in US politics. For more information see for example: R. E. DUNLAP, A. M. MCCRIGHT and J. H. YAROSH, “The Political Divide on Climate Change: Partisan Polarization Widens in the U.S.”, *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development*, vol. 58, no. 5, 25 August, 2016, p. 4-23, DOI: [10.1080/00139157.2016.1208995](https://doi.org/10.1080/00139157.2016.1208995)

⁵ B. BROWDER, *Freezing Order*, Simon & Schuster UK Ltd., London, 2022, p. 227.

To understand the key points that contribute to such strongly differing opinions and the divisions that come with it to an extent that applicable solutions can be created that will allow a turn towards inclusive socio-political debates instead of exclusive disputes, we need to examine what drives our political thinking. Thus, this article will provide an overview of how the human brain functions when it comes to controlling what we think and how we think. This includes the role of common biases that contribute to the reflex of jumping to conclusions, which often contribute to misunderstandings and disputes. In the next part we will discuss what is meant by rationality and rational behavior in political discussions. A clear understanding of the meaning of rationality will help us to create a logical framework within which the “*rules*” for constructive political debates can be developed. A good understanding of the functions of the human brain that influence the individual’s views and opinions will help to create methods to effectively introduce people to these “*rules*” that enable the creation of common grounds within which political discussions between participants with differing views and opinions can take place. Based on a good understanding of the role of the human brain within the boundaries of rational argumentation, the concept of Pragmatic Empathy will be introduced. Here the difference between empathy and Pragmatic Empathy will be highlighted with the intention of creating effective boundaries around the “*rules*” of political debates. Further, understanding Pragmatic Empathy will facilitate the assessment mechanism that helps identify the existing barriers that prevent the acceptance of common grounds as the underlying condition for political discussions. Following the creation of these theoretical foundations, some of the key factors that currently divide western societies will be assessed in order to highlight what needs to be understood to be able to teach and encourage Pragmatic Empathy effectively. One of the key aspects that needs to be examined in more detail is the concept of identity and the lack of broader mutual understandings of political and national identity. This will be covered before the main aspects of human psychology, rationality, empathy, political divisions and the role of identity discussed in this article will be combined with the intention of creating techniques that can substantially influence human behaviour in socio-politically tensed times and lead to the implementation of Pragmatic Empathy. In the concluding part of this article five steps towards the creation of conditions that allow constructive political discussions between people of differing views and opinions will sum up the main insights of the arguments provided in this article in a practically applicable manner.

2. A quick introduction to the (political) brain

Due to the drastic advancements in the field of cognitive psychology over the past 50 years, scientists studying different forms of human behavior can build their work upon - by now - well developed and widely reviewed foundations that allow a sophisticated understanding of the ways in which humans think and argue. In order for the reader to understand this psychological foundation, that should, as the author will argue, underlie every thorough examination of political behavior and thus also lays the foundation of the arguments that will follow in this discussion of understanding socio-political divisions in western democracies, the basic aspects of cognitive psychology relevant for this article should be briefly explained.

Human thinking processes can be divided into quick, intuitive thinking (as is usually applied when driving down an empty, familiar street) and deliberate, reflective thinking (which is applied for example when parking in a narrow space). Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky called these different forms of thinking System 1 (intuitive, driven by emotions and

associations) and System 2 (deliberate, rational, analytical).⁶ Evolutionary psychology explains why System 1 appears to be much more accessible than System 2 in most of our thinking. For the 99% of the approximately 2 million years of our existence as a species, we were hunters and gatherers.⁷ The most frequent decisions we had to make were related to immediate threats. The frequent threat level only started decreasing continuously over the past 10,000 years as we started living in larger groups and built villages and eventually towns and cities. This gave the human brain comparatively little time to adjust to the new environments that we are living in. Thus, we frequently underestimate the time we have to slow our thinking down and actively reflect upon a situation rather than reacting to it intuitively. As a result of that, we often use biases that lead to flawed assumptions and misunderstandings (quick self-experiment for the reader: How many animals of each type did Moses take on his ark?)⁸. Jonathan Haidt used these insights to further explain how our brains work when it comes to topics that divide opinions, such as religion and politics.⁹ Based on Kahneman and Tversky's research, Haidt argues that System 1 is the emotional part of the brain and System 2 is the rational part of the brain.¹⁰ To clarify the influences that those different sides have, Haidt invented the analogy of the “elephant” (the emotional side) and the “rider” (the rational, analytical side). The idea behind the analogy is that a comparatively small part of our brain is capable of rational thought, but we often assume that we are using this part of our brain most of the time. However, since the “elephant” is much stronger than the “rider”, when there is a disagreement between the two systems, the emotional part of the brain wins over the purely rational. Further, since the rational brain tends to be rather lazy and can be easily exhausted (e.g. through stress, hunger, tiredness, longer periods of active thinking), it is much more common for humans to think intuitively than we would like to admit to ourselves.¹¹ The underlying neuroscientific explanation is that what has been established as System 1 is controlled by the limbic system (amygdala and hippocampus) and System 2 is controlled by the neocortex.¹² The limbic system is much more active and influential than the neocortex when it comes to interpreting and prioritizing information. Thus, it is practically impossible to make decisions without any emotional influence. Or: the “elephant” always dictates the direction; the “rider” can see what the “elephant” enables him to see.

Understanding these mental activities is a first step towards understanding how political “discussions” often quickly turn into ideological disputes. In common cases we jump to conclusions without activating the analytical part of our brain, or we use the analytical brain in order to develop arguments that support the prejudgment that has already been made by System 1. When humans feel threatened (e.g. the validity of contradictory arguments could portray a

⁶ D. KAHNEMAN, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2011, p. 19 - 23

⁷ D. M. BUSS and D. T. KENRICK, “Evolutionary social psychology”, in D. T. GILBERT, S. T. FISKE and G. LINDZEY (Eds.), *The handbook of social psychology*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1998, p. 982–1026.

⁸ Are you sure Moses had an arch? Or was it Noah? D. KAHNEMAN, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, p. 73.

⁹ J. HAIDT, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, Pantheon Books, New York, 2012.

¹⁰ J. HAIDT, “Moral Psychology and the Law: How intuitions drive reasoning, judgement, and the search for evidence”, *University of Alabama Law Review*, Alabama, vol. 64, 2013 ; HAIDT, *The Righteous Mind*, p. 66.

¹¹ D. KAHNEMAN, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, p. 30 – 48.

¹² This article will not discuss the underlying neurological dimension of these behavioral patterns in more detail. For more information see: D. EAGLEMAN, *Incognito: The Secret Lives of the Brain*, Pantheon, New York, 2011; D. EAGLEMAN, J. DOWNAR, *Brain and Behavior: A Cognitive Neuroscience Perspective*, Oxford University Press, December 15, 2015.

potentially more accurate, objective explanation of reality than the one that you believe to be true)¹³ and start acting defensively, System 1 is in charge.¹⁴

Thus, evidence is being used selectively, and potentially conflicting evidence is being excluded.¹⁵ The underlying biases are known as the Confirmation Bias and the Desirability Bias.¹⁶ The easiest way to understand the Confirmation Bias is to imagine that System 1 subconsciously always asks one out of two potential questions when confronted with information: Can I believe this? (when confronted with information that confirms our thinking) and Must I believe this? (when confronted with information that challenges our thinking).¹⁷ When answering the question whether something can be believed, the simplest indication of validity is enough to answer the question with yes. When answering the question whether something must be believed the simplest indication of invalidity is enough to answer the question with no. Thus, the Confirmation Bias not only explains how people tend to develop their arguments but also how they often (do not) listen to people with different opinions.

The general awareness of the underlying influence of emotions that control System 1 therefore needs to be considered when discussing rationality in political discussions.

3. Rationality and the socio-political context

The Britannica definition of *rationality* is “*the use of knowledge to attain goals*”¹⁸. The definition of *knowledge* has been widely debated. For the purpose of this article, where an understanding of what individuals might consider as their own knowledge is more relevant than the philosophical meaning of the word, we shall briefly consider two widely accepted definitions in order to have a workable understanding of the definition of rationality cited above.

The Britannica dictionary defines knowledge as “*information, understanding, or skill that you get from experience or education*” and “*awareness of something*”.¹⁹ The adjective *aware* can be defined as “*feeling, experiencing, or noticing something*”²⁰. Thus, in order to judge whether an

¹³ This relates to the psychological theory of cognitive dissonance, for more information see: E. HARMON-JONES, J. MILLS, “An introduction to cognitive dissonance theory and an overview of current perspectives on the theory”, in E. HARMON-JONES (Ed.), *Cognitive dissonance: Reexamining a pivotal theory in psychology*, American Psychology Association, 2019, p. 3-24, <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/0000135-001>.

¹⁴ M. S. FANSELOW, “Neural organization of the defensive behavior system responsible for fear”, *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1994, p. 429 – 438.

¹⁵ D. KAHNEMAN, O. SIBONY, C. R. SUNSTEIN, *Noise: A Flaw in Human Judgment*, Little Brown Spark, New York, 2021, p. 168 – 171.

¹⁶ For more information regarding the Confirmation Bias see also: R. S. NICKERSON, “Confirmation Bias: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon in Many Guises”, *Review of General Psychology*, vol. 2, no 2, June 1998, p. 175 – 220, <https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.2.2.175>.

¹⁷ T. GILOVICH, *How We Know What Isn't So: The Fallibility of Human Reason in Everyday Life*, The Free Press, New York, 1991, p. 9 – 28.

¹⁸ BRITANNICA, “Rationality”, April 19, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/rationality>, consulted on May 25, 2023.

¹⁹ BRITANNICA DICTIONARY, “Knowledge”, <https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/knowledge>, consulted on May 25, 2023. For further information concerning the philosophical debate about the definition of knowledge see: R. PARIKH, A. RENERO, “Justified True Belief: Plate, Gettier, and Turing”, *Boston Studies in the Philosophy and History of Science*, vol. 324, May 31, 2017.

²⁰ A second definition according to the Britannica Dictionary would be “knowing that something exists”, but since this definition would lead back to the meaning of the word knowing and we would thus be arguing in a circle, the second definition is more workable for the purpose of understanding the key terminology related to rationality.

individual is acting rationally, we should question whether the individual's argument leads towards a specific goal (e.g. to explain what he or she believes is "true")²¹, and whether the foundations of the argument are not creatively invented but based on an actual awareness that the individual considers as valid information. Considering these two key points in the light of Bill Browder's quote stated in the introduction ("*almost everyone behaves rationally. If someone does something that appears irrational, it just means you don't have all the information*"), before we judge somebody's behavior as irrational, we have to examine whether there is an intended goal the behavior is meant to lead to, and the information that the individual accessed as the foundation of his or her behavior. Thus, if these two criteria are met, the individual should not be disregarded for acting irrationally. Instead, an examination of the origins of the underlying "knowledge" should be conducted.²²

To understand what a person considers as "knowledge" in the context of a specific argument, we need to relate back to the psychological factors that drive human thinking and decision making.²³ Potential factual flaws in what is considered by the person as knowledge would then not question the rationality of the actor but rather illuminate a potential lack of common ground between rational individuals presenting conflicting arguments, which prevents the conditions that are necessary for fruitful debates.

Even though it is fairly easy to notice when a common ground is missing between conversation partners, it is much harder to explicitly describe what is missing and, at a deeper level, explain what is causing the gap between different conversationalists.²⁴ To understand and eventually change the underlying tensions that prevent certain common grounds from existing between different groups within larger societies, the broader societal socio-political

BRITANNICA DICTIONARY, "Aware", <https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/aware>, consulted on May 25, 2023.

²¹ Obviously, the meaning of "truth" could be discussed here as well, but that would lead away from the purpose of this article. What is relevant here is to understand how believes that people hold have direct impacts of what can be considered as rational from the individual's perspective.

²² One may think now that this argument defends people who believe in conspiracy theories and implies that they may act rationally. However, even though we've seen conspiracy theorists quite frequently on the news in recent years, it is rare that people who believe in conspiracy theories also take what would be considered reasonable actions based on those believes and thus they do not fit into this definition of rationality. If they take action the intended outcomes contradict with what would be reasonable goals based on the underlying believes, which makes their behavior irrational. The few who do take action that would appear reasonable in the light of the conspiracy theory they believe in are exceptions to the rule and are the least likely to intend to enter constructive debates with people who think differently. For more information about rationality and conspiracy theories and other forms of extreme motivated reasoning see: S. PINKER, *Rationality: What it is, why it seems scarce, why it matters*, Allen Lane, New York, 2021, p. 298 – 303.

²³ Similar questions have been examined in the interdisciplinary field of Political Psychology, but these tend to focus on political leaders, behavior of groups, the evolution of political regimes, voting behavior, violent conflicts and terrorism. Thus, the main focus has been on leadership or specific high stake situations but less on the role of individuals in grassroots dynamics that contribute to the larger socio-political picture. For more information see: J. VAN GENNEKEN, "Outline of a Cultural History of Political Psychology", in W. F. Stone, P. E. Schaffner (eds.), *The Psychology of Politics (2nd ed.)*, Springer, New York, 1988, p. 3–22.

²⁴ Several analyses have attempted to highlight the differences between arguments of different groups within society, but these analyses, even though important for our understanding of politics and the political dynamics withing populations, are focusing on the surface of the political "debate", on what is explicitly said (and potentially deliberately not said), rather than psychological influence on underlying assumptions. A great overview of the main aspects of discourse analysis can be found in D. TANNEN, H. E. HAMILTON, D. SCHIFFRIN (eds.), *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., New Jersey, 2015.

discourse must be (implicitly) changed starting from the very bottom (the factors that influence the individual's System 1) up, rather than the other way around.²⁵

The economist Richard Thaler and the legal scholar Cass Sunstein have developed a theoretical framework for this form of endeavor, which they named Nudge.²⁶ In a nutshell, nudging aims at influencing people's decisions unconsciously with the goal of directing them towards the best options. The practical approach behind it is to design people's environments in ways that they are more likely to choose the "best" out of several options (e.g. to pick healthy groceries instead of unhealthy processed food in a supermarket by presenting healthy products at more visible shelf-levels and unhealthy products in less visible places; to make organ donations a default option which people can bail out of if they decide to, rather than offering people the option of signing up as organ donors). Their concepts have been applied by policymakers in different countries, including the UK.²⁷ The fact that these approaches were directed at easily tangible preferences made it easier to find ways to influence people's behavior accordingly than it will be to nudge individuals towards creating and respecting a common ground for socio-political debates. However, the underlying interplay between cognitive psychology and applied rationality is the same and thus offers a well examined theoretical foundation.

The main difference between applying Nudging in the ways described above and using similar concepts to create a common ground for fruitful socio-political discourse is that instead of statistically estimating the ideal outcome and physically implementable ways to influence its likelihood, practitioners need to create the acceptance of a wider range of interpretations and prioritizations of arguments. In order for this concept to be able to improve broader discourses from the very bottom up, a certain degree of empathy is crucial. For the practical purpose of enabling this to make the general concept of bottom-up discourse improvement work, we shall call it pragmatic empathy.

4. Pragmatic Empathy (and its boundaries)

The objective *raison d'être* of socio-political discourse needs to be defined as attempts of contributing to the development of the best solution for existing problems for most of the population. Since, as discussed above, one of the two main components of rational behavior is that the decisions the individual makes are meant to lead towards a theoretically attainable goal, the broader goal behind participating in socio-political debates at any point should be to constructively contribute to the general discourse. This gives us a frame within which rational arguments fit and irrational arguments can be easily detected and excluded (e.g. intentionally insulting or degrading fellow conversationalists is counterproductive for the goal of constructively contributing to the discourse and thus irrational). In order to remain within this

²⁵ Working on conflicts bottom up, rather than just top down, is a provenly crucial part of conflict resolution. For more information see: A. RIPLEY, *High Conflict: Why we get trapped and how we get out*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2021, p. 232.

²⁶ C. R. SUNSTEIN, R. THALER, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness*, Penguin Books, London, 2009.

²⁷ For more information concerning "Nudge units" see: Z. AFIF, "Nudge units' – where they came from and what they can do", *World Bank Blogs*, October 25, 2017, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/developmenttalk/nudge-units-where-they-came-and-what-they-can-do>, consulted on June 6, 2023; J. RUTTER, "Nudge Unit", *Institute for Government*, March 11, 2020, <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/article/explainer/nudge-unit#:~:text=What%20is%20the%20Nudge%20Unit.has%20operations%20across%20the%20world>, consulted June 6, 2023.

frame, participants need to be able to control the emotions that make it to the conscious part of the brain, which, in practical terms, means the activation of System 2.

This is where the idea of “Pragmatic Empathy” comes into play.²⁸ Empathy is defined as “*the ability to recognize, understand, and share the thoughts and feelings of another person*”²⁹. Since a form of empathy is needed to participate within the boundaries of the frame described above but does not need to go to the extent of necessarily feeling compassion for people whose political views differ strongly from one’s own (which would be ideal but too much to ask at this stage), which is often implied in empathetic behavior, Pragmatic Empathy is a more accurate terminology here. Thus, within socio-political debates with people one might disagree with on certain topics, one may apply empathy out of the self-interest of being able to continue participating in the debate in rational ways.

Understanding when individuals apply Pragmatic Empathy and when their behavior steps outside of the frame that encompasses rational arguments gives us a good foundation to define and assess the existing gaps that need to be filled to create broader common grounds where they do not exist yet. This gives us a good starting point to systematically identify and finally focus on specific aspects of underlying assumptions (“*knowledge*”) and the potential influence of System 1 in creating them.

In the current partisan political climate this creation of broader common grounds may appear as a utopian, unattainable concept. However, the application of cognitive psychological concepts in initially unrelated considered areas (mainly economics) has proven over the past decades that the understanding of up to that point mono-disciplinarily examined problems can be (systematically) revolutionized.³⁰ Thus, there is hope that this will also be feasible in public socio-political discourses. In order to encourage such developments in the sphere of socio-political challenges at the grassroots level, after examining some of the current dividing socio-political tensions in western societies, a systematic approach towards Pragmatic Empathy that

²⁸ The term “*Pragmatic Empathy*” can only be found in a very small number of scientific publications in different fields. It is there applied to different purposes and thus defined differently than it is in this article. The closest to the understanding of Pragmatic Empathy that is used in this article can be found in a PhD thesis by John W. Pell from the University of North Carolina. John W. Pell explains Pragmatic Empathy as a “*phase of communicative interaction where speakers respond to another to common concerns*” and thus “*best articulates successful discursive encounters across cultural, political, and social differences*”. This meaning of Pragmatic Empathy differs from the one applied in this article since its application focuses on language and communication in inter-cultural contexts and emphasizes the role of the speaker, while in this article Pragmatic Empathy is primarily focused on intra-cultural communication and in this context functions as a form of boundary that intends to keep discussions constructive and thus applies to all participants of socio-political debates. For more information concerning the alternative application of Pragmatic Empathy, see: J. W. PELL, (*An*)other way: *Pragmatic empathy as response to discursive conflict*, Greensboro ProQuest Dissertation Publishing, North Carolina, 2010. Other publication in which the term Pragmatic Empathy is used but also defined and applied differently are: L. HAI-HUI, “Mitigation and Pragmatic Empathy”, *Journal of Literature and Art Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2019, p. 209-220; and S. ZHANG, X. WU, Y. FENG, “An Analysis of Cultural Differences in Chinese and English First-person Deixis from the Perspective of Pragmatic Empathy”, *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, vol. 3, no. 10, 2013, p. 1868-1872; X. ZHANGHONG, W. QIAN, “Pragmatic Empathy as a Grand Strategy in Business Letter Writing”, *English Language Teaching*, vol. 11, no. 8, 2018, p. 14-27.

²⁹ PSYCHOLOGY TODAY, “Empathy“, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/basics/empathy>, consulted May 26, 2023.

³⁰ The psychologist Daniel Kahneman was eventually awarded The Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel in 2002. Nowadays “behavioral economics” are taught at Harvard University. For more information about the evolution of the interlinked field of cognitive psychology and economics see: R. THALER, *Misbehaving: The Making of Behavioral Economic*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 2016. (Richard Thaler was also awarded the Nobel Prize for Economics in 2017).

can be applied to enable wider constructive political debates in western societies will be laid out.

5. Some of the key factors that divide western societies.

The biggest contributor to economic and technological developments in recent decades has been the latest step of Globalization. Globalization can be defined as “*increasing and intensified flows between countries of goods, services, capital, ideas, information and people, which produce cross-border integration of a number of economic, social and cultural activities*”³¹. This definition already highlights the multidimensional and interlinked changes that have been occurring in the west and most other parts of the world and that the vast majority of western populations have been benefiting from in one way or another. However, as the Brexit campaign in the United Kingdom, the Donald Trump election in 2016, as well as political developments in European Union member states have shown, a fair share of members of the public of western societies expressed disappointment with developments that are related to effects of globalization.³² Studies have quickly shown that such sentiments are often based on misunderstandings and overestimations (e.g. one of the strongest contributors to societal disputes in the US, UK and Europe is migration. In US surveys the participants estimated the part of the population that was not born in the US twice as high as the actual number, in several European countries the estimations were three to four times as high as the actual numbers).³³ Due to such overestimations (similar misinterpretations are frequently made when guessing the global output of multinational firms), arguments related to concerns that indicate statistical incorrectness are often quickly debunked without examining the underlying causes of such misinterpretations. The goal of this article is obviously not to justify the use of flawed information in order to create strategic arguments, but rather to highlight that underlying causes of perceptions, assumptions and intentions that result out of such should be taken into consideration in order to break down the barriers of socio-political echo-chambers that prevent any chance for public discourse at the grassroots level. As discussed above, System 1 contributes strongly to what individuals accept as “*knowledge*” and thus creates the underlying foundation of arguments that are being developed or accepted. Thus, if the “*elephant*” feels threatened due to a perception of societal change that will not benefit that individual, he guides

³¹ G. BERTUCCI, A. ALBERTI, *Globalization and the Role of the State: Challenges and Perspectives*, 1. January 2003, https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/29982918/unpan006225-libre.pdf?1390878595=&response-content-disposition=inline%3B+filename%3DGlobalization_and_the_Role_of_the_State.pdf&Expires=1684929875&Signature=JLbZBPtRoop6bPud-nm03kIEbb7sg7YP9i9c2woJTH8YipWJ7RDvrsbzYmXnTaJ3dUvJ6XrS1ouA9EBV~MFBLLAg8RNinUCAx2dNoTjgAGHABCH~beN7z7h-JBjT2NcOoRxEkG5EM4NAfvSCb0KN1TwwFEdqKxEODT-esMgsqTP11iMc4r0A3ck3R5rg~8YyP~Xp81aWLMQaAt2-rjfhLMF8xQ112S7zGIQluxzdwqwfizB4qZd86TN91Hux3UvrMeznhCKn~6ZoYJPEYLjw~X1rLUoc74~ZKTBgwp6kUoKDQS5F9BxpzOMLpM-a4tLYOatnc1S1cRTohdF8cibg_&Key-Pair-Id=APKAJLOHF5GGSLRBV4ZA, consulted on 24 May 2023.

³² For more information see: C. HOLDEN, “Confronting Brexit and Trump: towards a socially progressive globalization”, *Social Policy Review* 29, Policy Press, Bristol, 2017, p. 63 – 82, <https://doi.org/10.51952/9781447336228.ch004>; D. COYLE, “Brexit and globalization” in R. E. Baldwin (ed.), *Brexit Beckons: Thinking ahead by leading economists*, CEPR Press, London, 2016, p. 23 – 27; M. COX, “The Rise of Populism and the Crisis of Globalisation: Brexit, Trump and Beyond”, *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, vol. 28, 2017, p. 9 – 17; M. KALDOR, “Nationalism and Globalisation”, *Journal of the Association for the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism*, vol. 10, no. 1, January, 2004, p. 161 – 177, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1354-5078.2004.00161.x>

³³ P. GHEMAWAT, “People are angry about globalization. Here’s what to do about it.”, *Harvard Business Review*, 4 November, 2016, <https://hbr.org/2016/11/people-are-angry-about-globalization-heres-what-to-do-about-it>, consulted 24 May 2023.

the “*rider*” in a direction where he will find information that justify that feeling and neglects information that challenge the emotion. The arguments that are then developed can be considered rational, but they will make it impossible to create the common ground necessary to have a constructive discussion with people whose “*elephants*” guided their “*riders*” to look for contradictory information.³⁴

Besides motivations linked to interfering with the developments related to globalisation, one of the main reasons stated as why people decided to vote leave in the Brexit referendum in 2016 was “*to teach British politicians a lesson*”³⁵. The strategic benefit individuals could have gained based on this reason to vote leave is questionable, but the fact that it motivated people to vote in favour of leaving the European Union without the European Union being in any way part of the argument indicates a feeling of underrepresentation in the politics of the government and detachment from other societal groups that supported the government at the time. To understand how well democracies function, the feeling of (lack of) representation is important to examine, since detachment between groups within the general public and individual actors related to political decision making in the country indicates a large lack of common ground based on an understanding of having benefited or suffered due to policies implemented by people who some feel more understood and represented by than others.

Many of the leave voters regarded the Brexit referendum as a way to express their frustration and distance from an “*elite*” they feel excluded from. The question whether certain groups are actually underrepresented or marginalized has been widely debated by politicians and scholars in many societies around the western world and beyond.³⁶ For the sake of the argument of this article, this question is secondary (also because it is rare that members or the groups that feel underrepresented or marginalized get to participate in these debates). The more important question is what makes people think they are underrepresented and demotivates them to participate in bipartisan political discussions.

As analyses of leave and remain voters indicate, the combination of social background and the direction of social mobility turned out to be strong indicators of the decision made at

³⁴ A simple definition of “echo-chambers” is: “Social structures that systematically exclude sources of information”. Echo-chambers prevent any form of common ground and frequently cause a distrust in people who think or argue differently. For more information see: C. THI NGUYEN, “Escape the echo chamber”, *aeon*, 9 April 2018, <https://cs50.harvard.edu/x/2021/labs/10/chamber.pdf>, consulted 24 May, 2023.

³⁵ “CSI Brexit 4: People’s Stated Reasons for Voting Leave or Remain”, *The UK in a Changing Europe*, 24 April, 2018, <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/CSI-Brexit-4-People’s-Stated-Reasons-for-Voting-Leave.pdf>, consulted 24 May, 2023.

³⁶ For more information concerning underrepresentation and marginalization see: A. ROSS ARGUEDAS et al, *News for the powerful and privileged: how misrepresentation and underrepresentation of disadvantaged communities undermines their trust in news*, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2023; J. W. P. VEUGELERS, “Right-Wing Extremism in Contemporary France: A ‘Silent Counterrevolution’?”, *The Sociological Quarterly*, vol. 41, no. 1, December 12, 2016, p. 19 – 40, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.2000.tb02364.x>; L. VOGEL, “(How) Perceived Descriptive Underrepresentation Decreases Political Support: The Case of East Germany”, *German Politics*, vol. 32, no. 1, May 17, 2022, p. 169 – 190, <https://doi.org/10.1080/096444008.2022.2058494>; R. M. DANCYGIER, “Why Are Immigrants Underrepresented in Politics? Evidence from Sweden”, *American Political Science Review*, vol. 109, no. 4, November, 2015, p. 703 – 724, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055415000404>; N. CARNES, N. LUPU, “Do Voters Dislike Working-Class Candidates? Voter Biases and the Descriptive Underrepresentation of the Working Class”, *American Political Science Review*, vol. 110, no. 4, November, 2016, p. 832 – 844, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055416000551>; P. JOHN, “Can Citizen Governance Redress the Representative Bias of Political Participation?”, *Public Administration Review*, vol. 69, no. 3, May, 2009, p. 494 – 503, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2009.01995.x>.

the polling station, where social origins also influenced the voting behaviour of individuals who had experienced upward social mobility.³⁷ This further underlines the argument that social identities, predominantly based on social class, as well as a perception of opportunities in society, impact political thinking and who individuals identify with and discuss political topics with.³⁸ Thus, the aspect of identification and identity needs to be highlighted here.

A few months after the Brexit referendum in the UK, American citizens went to the polls. Through a survey experiment with a participation of 1,055 American adults from all parts of the USA, Byungku Lee and Peter Bearman analysed who to and about what Americans talked during the fall of 2016 (leading up to and following the presidential elections).³⁹ Their analysis shows that the size of political discussion networks had become drastically smaller and the type of discussion partners narrower than in previous years. The main reason for that was a perception of partisan politization of topics that made people more careful when assessing who to discuss potentially confrontational political topics with. A related reason for the decrease in the size of political discussion networks was an increase in political homophily (people only talk about politics with people who support the same party). These factors further highlight the gap between different members of the public regarding political views, as well as an increased perception of conflict potential in political discussions.

Due to the, compared to the UK, different demographical set up of the USA, the narrowing down of political discussion networks cannot be identically traced back to predominantly social class related aspects, but, as in the UK, to the understanding of identity and a decrease in identification with other groups within the larger national society. Similar trends were observed in western European countries.⁴⁰ This helps us to understand the increased lack of common grounds between different groups within the same society and partisan disputes instead of constructive grassroots level political debates. Therefore, to better understand the underlying reasons for large socio-political divisions and how to overcome them, the aspect of identity should be addressed in more detail.

6. (Political) Identity

The examples examined above indicate that the individual's understanding of identity functions as a strong contributor to socio-political divisions based on differing underlying assumptions picked by System 1.

³⁷ A. MCNEIL and C. HABERSTROH, "Intergenerational social mobility and the Brexit vote: How social origins and destinations divide Britain", *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 62, no. 2, May, 2023, p. 612 – 632, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12526>.

³⁸ For more information about political exclusion in the UK see: G. EVANS and J. TILLEY, *The New Politics of Class: The Political Exclusion of the British Working Class*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2017.

³⁹ B. LEE and P. BEARMAN, "Political isolation in America", *Network Science*, February 26, 2020, vol. 8, no. 3, p. 333 – 355.

⁴⁰ For more information see: A. NOURY and G. ROLAND, "Identity Politics and Populism in Europe", *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 23, February 8, 2020, p. 421 – 439, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-050718-033542>.

Identity is commonly defined as “the qualities, beliefs, etc., that make a particular person or group different from others”⁴¹.

The concept of national identities has long been debated. The two leading opposing arguments are that identity politics can be exclusive and are thus used to oppress minority groups, and that identities can be inclusive and thus unite different groups within a population, which would provide a strong foundation for trust and dialogue between citizens.⁴² As a consequence of the former concept of identity politics, smaller and politically narrower groups have developed within western societies in recent decades. The development of social media accelerated this process and contributed to the development of echo chambers, within which people who did not find themselves represented in the national identity concept (anymore) found similar minded peers.⁴³ As the surveys discussed above, as well as broader research, have shown, these echo chambers whose members are united under the idea of a form of (political) identity have contributed to barriers of distrust and judgement between different groups, which made constructive discussions between them much harder. The echo-chamber-effect minimizes the access to similar basic information between different groups, which contributes to differing underlying assumptions upon which arguments are constructed.

Due to the functioning of the human brain, the lack of mutual understandings of basic information is not examined but rather divided into a Manichean mindset of right and wrong. The argumentative discrepancies of general understanding caused by these differing underlying assumptions are further widened by System 1 (the political “elephant”), which prioritizes information that can be used to strengthen and reinforce the view of the political tribe a person identifies with.⁴⁴ Known as the myside bias, this form of (subconscious) thinking aims at keeping the individual united with members of the same political tribe through a feeling of moral superiority, which implies that people with opposing views are a threat and need to be treated as such.⁴⁵ This combination of a narrow coverage of information within echo chambers of people who share the same political identity, and therein the prioritization of information that underline the viewpoint of the political tribe people with the same political identity feel part of, causes a vicious cycle.⁴⁶

In most parts of the (western) world, this vicious cycle is further tightened through partisan cable TV channels, newspapers, and radio stations. Social media further narrows down groups of people with similar political identities and creates the ultimate echo chambers.⁴⁷

Fortunately, the study of behaviour and especially decision making based on the political identity and belongingness to a specific political tribe gives us some clues for how

⁴¹ BRITANNICA DICTIONARY, “Identity”, <https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/identity>, consulted May 30, 2023.

⁴² Francis Fukuyama, one of the leading scholars in the national identity debate summarized both angles in this article: F. FUKUYAMA, “Why National Identity Matters”, *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 29, no. 4, October, 2018, p. 5 – 15, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2018.0058>.

⁴³ S. Y. ABRAMS, “E Pluribus Unum – The Fight Over Identity Politics”, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 98, 2019, p. 160-175.

⁴⁴ K. E. STANOVICH, *The bias that divides us: The science and politics of myside thinking*, MIT Press, Boston, 2021, p. 1 – 26.

⁴⁵ E. FINKEL *et al.*, “Political Sectarianism in America”, *Science*, vol. 370, 2020, p. 533 – 536.

⁴⁶ J. G. MARCH, *Primer on Decision Making: How Decisions Happen*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1994, Ch. 2.

⁴⁷ S. PINKER, *Rationality – What it is, why it seems scarce, why it matters*, Allen Lane, Dublin, 2021, p. 296 - 297.

these vicious cycles can be interrupted. As James G. March highlighted in his book *Primer on Decision Making: How Decisions Happen*, the basis of the process of decision making is provided by identities and given rules.⁴⁸ While personal identities apply to every part of life, rules depend on the given environment a person finds themselves in. By setting certain expectations and norms (e.g. to follow the basic rules of rationality), the understanding of implicit rules can be adjusted in favour of the situation people find themselves in. Over time, through the continuous activation of System 2, norms and expectations can contribute to a new form of identity. In order to create a wider common ground that allows debates between people with different political views (from different political tribes), this new form of identity should be an inclusive national identity, which forms the umbrella identity underneath which different members of society can constructively debate what's the best way forward for the larger society, rather than just for narrow groups within that society.

How this can be systematically achieved will be explained in the next section.

7. How to implement Pragmatic Empathy

So far, we learned where to (and how to) look for the underlying causes of socio-political divisions within societies. However, without the application of the right techniques in order to create new common grounds that allow broader constructive socio-political discussions, the findings of thorough analyses of underlying causes of such divisions could not lead anywhere. Thus, this section will discuss potential techniques that can substantially influence human behaviour in socio-politically tensed times through the application of psychological insights, under consideration of the logic of rationality.

Since System 1 strongly influences the thoughts we form and creates the underlying assumptions that set the foundations of in itself usually rational arguments, the techniques that can influence the behaviour in socio-political debates need to focus on the emotions people experience in the context of socio-political debates, the political “elephant”. Fear and anger contribute to a sharper focus of the “elephant” and thus gives the “rider” only access to an even more limited amount of information than usual. This, as discussed above, explains why political discussions often quickly lose all forms of constructiveness and turn into disputes. Positive emotions have the opposite effect. When people experience positive emotions, they allow the conscious brain to actively consider a broader range of information and motivate the “rider” to be more imaginative and to investigate a larger field of ideas.⁴⁹ Environments that

⁴⁸ J. G. MARCH, *Primer on Decision Making: How Decisions Happen*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1994, Ch. 2

⁴⁹ B. L. DREDRICKSON, “What good are positive emotions?”, *Review of General Psychology*, vol. 2, no. 3, September 2, 1998, p. 300-319. For further information concerning the impact of positive emotions see also: J. R. AVERILL “On the paucity of positive emotions”, in K. R. BLANKSTEIN, P. PLINER and J. POLIVY *Advances in the study of communication and affect: vol. 6: Assessment and modification of emotional behavior*, Plenum, New York, 1980, p. 7-45.; T. BRYAN, S. MATHUR, K. SULLIVAN, “The impact of positive mood on learning”, *Learning Disabilities Quarterly*, vol. 19, 1996, p. 153-162; J. T. CACIOPPO, D. J. KLEIN, G. G. BERTSON, E. HATFIELD, “The psychophysiology of emotion”, in M. LEWIS and J. M. HAVILAND, *Handbook of emotion*, Guilford Press, New York, 1993, p. 119-142; P. J. D. CARNEVALE and A. M. ISEN, “The influence of positive affect and visual access on the discovery of integrative solutions in bilateral negotiation”, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, vol. 37, 1986, p. 1-13; R. J. DAVIDSON, “The neuropsychology of emotion and affective style”, in M. LEWIS and J. M. HAVILAND, *Handbook of emotion*, Guilford Press, New York, 1993 p. 143-154; D. DERRYBERRY and D. M.

encourage positive emotions can be created through different stimuli, such as the geographic environment encounters take place in, the architecture of buildings people interact in (e.g. large windows and views of people interacting stimulate positive, constructive thinking), decoration (e.g. posters/paintings that imply harmony) as well as background noise (e.g. slower, meditative music can cause a decrease in stress levels), before the actual discussion begins.⁵⁰ This creates a positive starting point for fruitful debates. In combination with the stimulation of positive emotions, the frame for rational discussions should be explicitly and repetitively highlighted. The combination of positive emotional stimulation and thus a widened field of conscious attention and consideration, and reminders of the general “rules” of discussions allow participants to enter debates with an active (System 2) mindset rather than a reactive (System 1) mindset.⁵¹ These basic techniques can be implemented in public, grassroots discussion events and they can be easily taught to members of the public who are motivated to implement them in private settings where people of different political orientations come together.

Once these foundations for socio-political debates are established, it is important to highlight the smallest forms of positive progress that is being achieved (e.g. first constructive discussions between people who have been in dispute over socio-political arguments). This helps to underline first steps towards a new common ground, that allows further progress. From a psychological perspective, this is important because it has been proven repetitively that the most difficult step towards change is the creation of the motivation to start.⁵² Since humans (thanks to System 1) are hard to motivate to do things that do not give them an immediate reward, a lack of positive feedback could quickly lead to the collapse of the positive foundation of socio-political debates. Thus, if the first steps in a favourable direction are not complimented, System 1 can quickly be demoralized and retrieve to its previous default behaviour.⁵³ Through the smallest forms of reassurance and reminders of progress, progress that has been achieved can be transformed into a positive momentum, which then also further encourages System 1 to allow positive emotions to continuously enable System 2 to think (and listen) actively and broadly enough to consider differing opinions instead of reflexively debunking them.⁵⁴

TUCKER, “Motivating the focus of attention“, in P. M. NEIDENTHAL and S. KITAYAMA, *The heart's eye: Emotional influences in perception and attention*, Academic Press, San Diego, 1994, p. 167–196; L. MLODINOW, *Emotional: How Feelings Shape Our Thinking*, Allen Lane, London, 2022.

⁵⁰ R. CIALDINI, *Pre-Suasion*, Random House Books, London, 2016, p.116 – 120, 132 - 133. For further information on the influence of music on human behavior also see: A. NORTH and D. HARGREAVES, *The Social and Applied Psychology of Music*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008, p. 315 - 325; A. NORTH, D. HARGREAVES and J. HARGREAVES, “Uses of Music in Everyday Life”, *Music Perception*, vol. 22, no. 1, p. 41 – 77; A. NORTH, D. HARGREAVES and J. MCKENDRICK, “In-store music affects product choice”, *Nature*, vol. 390, <https://doi.org/10.1038/36484>; A. NORTH, D. HARGREAVES and J. MCKENDRICK, “Music and on-hold waiting time”, *British Journal of Psychology*, vol. 90, no 1, p. 161 – 164.

⁵¹ A strong example for the power of positive emotions as an activating force for System 2 thinking in discussions around heated topics had been shown in *The Difficult Conversation Lab* under the supervision of the social psychologist Peter T. Coleman. For more information see: A. RIPLEY, *High Conflict: Why we get trapped and how we get out*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2021, p. 243 – 245.

⁵² A. BANDURA and D. H. SCHUNK, “Cultivating Competence, Self-Efficacy and Intrinsic Interest Through Proximal Self- Motivation”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 41, p. 586 – 598.

⁵³ C. HEATH and D. HEATH, *Switch*, Random House, 2011, London, p. 129- 131.

⁵⁴ K. E. WEICK, “Small Wins: Redefining the Scale of Social Problems”, *American Psychologist*, vol. 39, no. 1, 1984, p. 46.

The continuous activation of System 2 also helps to prevent one of the most common thinking errors that occurs in heated discussions, the fundamental attribution error.⁵⁵ The fundamental attribution error explains that people tend to underestimate the extent to which situational circumstances affect other people's behaviour (think about what you think of other people when they cut you off in traffic and what you think about yourself when you cut somebody in traffic. Most people tend to attribute fundamental character flaws to others while blaming the circumstances for their own mistakes). This is important to understand when it comes to the frame within which rational discussions take place and what needs to be considered as rational, even if the underlying understanding of the topic for discussion is not considered equally reasonable by other discussion participants. The awareness of the fundamental attribution error therefore helps us to reflect upon the reasons why different people have different sources of information or prioritize information differently and thus develop quite different arguments, even when the applied tools of rationality are the same. Thus, this understanding is a crucial part of the development of the skill of Pragmatic Empathy.

Over the long-term Pragmatic Empathy can then be further encouraged by redefining the expectations and norms that characterize the rational participation in discussions.⁵⁶ Such developments can obviously not be implemented on an entire population at once, but the repetitive creation of discussion events under the guidance of the factors explained in this section can have the positive effects that can eventually change the socio-political debating culture of a population.⁵⁷ Besides public grassroots political discussion events and organized private gatherings with trained participants, organized debates in school and university environments can also enable participants to develop the skill of Pragmatic Empathy and thus enable them to positively influence bipartisan debates beyond such actively regulated environments.⁵⁸

Especially at the early stages of the development of Pragmatic Empathy as a foundation of constructive debating cultures, the environments discussions take place in are crucial. The examples mentioned above help to create such environments that stimulate constructive interactions. Since the main intention behind these environments is to create an atmosphere where the participants do not feel judged and are feeling encouraged to substitute empathy for biases, we shall call them "*encouraging environments*". These allow the creation of new norms that define the culture within which debates take place. The concept of creating such encouraging environments has proven to be a strong aspect of peacebuilding processes in post-conflict societies such as Northern Ireland.⁵⁹ Similar concepts thus also promise to be fruitful

⁵⁵ L. ROSS, "The Intuitive Psychologist and His Shortcomings: Distortion in the Attribution Process", in L. Berkowitz (ed.), *Advances in Experimental Psychology*, vol. 10, Academic Press, New York, 1977.

⁵⁶ C. HEATH, D. HEATH, *Switch*, p. 206.

⁵⁷ Changes of similar size have been achieved in vast majorities of western cultures in relation to other norms that were once considered normal and are now regarded as inappropriate, e.g. littering, discriminatory jokes, racist comments. For more information on such changes in cultural norms see: S. PINKER, 2021, p. 313 – 314.

⁵⁸ C. HEATH, D. HEATH, *Switch*, p. 233.

⁵⁹ Different concepts of environments in which members of the two different communities in Northern Ireland learned to communicate peacefully have been created over the years, from peace communities to exchange programs for Catholics and Protestants and integrated schools. Even though the number of integrated schools is still comparatively low in Northern Ireland, the results speak for them. Other influential factors, such as the question what type of home environments parents willing to send their children to such schools create for their children compared to parents who are not willing to do so also need to be considered. However, studies have shown that such initiatives have a positive impact and in the context of this article, as in the context of peacebuilding and peacekeeping in Northern Ireland, the free spaces created need to be regarded as a part of a larger approach rather than the complete solution to the existing problems. For more information on studies concerning integrative schools and exchange programs for Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland see: A.

in societies that are not in a civil war but rather divided by differing views on socio-political topics.⁶⁰

The application of Pragmatic Empathy and the development of new norms that favour constructive discussions, in combination with the interaction with people who initially appeared to be of different political tribes can over time contribute to changes in the identities that individuals experience in and eventually beyond such encouraging environments. These new, inclusive national identities, then set the end goal behind the large-scale development of Pragmatic Empathy, which creates the common ground that is broad enough for all members of society who are willing to follow the rules of rationality in political discussions to constructively contribute and learn to adjust their arguments based on the contributions of other members of society.⁶¹

8. Conclusion

Applying cognitive psychology in the context of differing forms of socio-political “*knowledge*” and understanding what rationality means in the context of socio-political debates shows that current divisions over socio-political arguments within western societies need to be tackled through a bottom-up approach, starting by addressing the political “*elephant*”, rather than trying to influence the “*rider*” by challenging the validity of his arguments, who in reaction would source out its thinking activities back to the “*elephant*”.

This article has presented an approach towards the creation of a new common ground that includes everyone who is willing to present rational arguments, under the conditions that arguments are based on information that the individual genuinely considers as knowledge and that he or she creates arguments that aim towards achieving a genuine socio-political goal. The five main steps towards the creation of this common ground can be summarized as:

1. Set the foundation by stimulating positive emotions that enable the individual to think more broadly and to be more imaginative when it comes to understanding other people’s opinions, the opposite of what occurs when people feel negative emotions such as fear or anger.
2. Highlight early successes at the beginning of a potential path towards a common ground in order to satisfy the System 1 reward system and thus encourage further open engagement.

TOMOVSKA, “Contact as a tool for peace education? Reconsidering the contact hypothesis from the children’s perspectives”, *Journal of Peace Education*, vol. 7, no. 2, p. 121 – 138; A. MONTGOMERY, G. FRASER, C. MCGLYNN and T. GALLAGHER, *Integrated Education in Northern Ireland: Integration in practice*, UNESCO Center, University of Ulster, Colerain, Northern Ireland, 2003; L. PICKETT, “Integrated Schools in Northern Ireland: Education for Peace and Reconciliation”, *Childhood Education*, vol. 84, no. 6, p. 351-356; R. DAVEY, “Corrymeela Community and Changing Attitudes in Northern Ireland”, *Contact/Practical Theory*, vol. 64, no. 1, p. 15-18.

⁶⁰ A decline of civil-society organizations that include and attract a wide variety of members of the public further highlights the need for the creation of such free spaces. For more information see: L. FINKEL, C.A. BAIL, et al, “Political Sectarianism in America”, *Science*, vol. 370, p. 533 – 536; W. WILKINSON, *The density divide: Urbanization, polarization, and populist backlash*, Niskanen Center, Washington DC, 2019.

⁶¹ For more information about the psychologically proven feasibility behind such concepts, see: J. L. FREEDMAN and S. C. FRASER, “Compliance Without Pressure: The Foot-in-the-door Technique”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 4, 1966, p. 195 – 203; R. CIALDINI, *Influence: Science and Practice*, Allyn & Bacon, New York, 2000, p. 43 – 86.

3. Strengthen the skill of Pragmatic Empathy throughout the process in order to prevent the fundamental attribution error and enable participants to actively differentiate between circumstantial factors and character traits that contribute to socio-political opinions. This helps to see different opinions as results of sub-conscious interpretations of circumstances rather than judging a person's character, which would make constructive debates impossible.
4. Create a new understanding of expectations and norms for grassroots participants in socio-political discussions through the creation of encouraging environments that allow people to familiarize themselves with such expectations and norms and over time turn them into habits.
5. Create new umbrella-identities, under which different members of society feel united without feeling threatened in their individual identities. This enables a frame within which the basic rules of rational arguments become enforced through the trained skill of Pragmatic Empathy.

Since an underlying necessity for these steps to work is the creation of environments that encourage the behaviors that over time can lead towards a larger common ground amongst the population of a larger society, instead of many smaller echo chambers, which are not capable of sharing views and stimulating communal thinking amongst each other, the main responsibility in the early stages needs to be given to schools and universities, as well as other education centers, and town-halls, that can prepare individuals to set examples of Pragmatic Empathy in social dialogues and forward the training skills gained from experiences of bipartisan debates and workshops.

In the interview cited at the beginning of this article, Barack Obama added “*what the Russians exploited, but it was already here [...] if you watch Fox News, you are living on a different planet than you are if you listen to NPR*”⁶². This article has argued that a strong reason for these galactic divisions in socio-political arguments is a lack of willingness and understanding of constructive discussions with people who receive information through different sources and thus have different views and opinions. The intention behind this article was to develop a solution to this problem. Applying the five steps explained above will not be easy, but they are more important than ever, to protect the democratic values that have been challenged within our divided societies.

⁶² D. LETTERMAN, “My Next Guest Needs No Introduction”, *Netflix*, 2018, 41-42min.

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