
Responsible Debate
Learning Resources

Worksheet 2

RSE **YOUNG**
ACADEMY
OF SCOTLAND



**How our
identities
affect debate**

In this worksheet, you're going to learn about:

- 1 **The challenges that aspects of our identity can pose for responsible debate, and**
- 2 **Ways to avoid these problems.**

How to use this worksheet:



This icon indicates where someone **reads the text aloud** and the others follow along.



This icon indicates a **group exercise** where you **discuss** and **write something down**.



This icon indicates a **solo exercise** where you do some **thinking** and **writing** alone.

Introduction: What is Identity?



READ ALOUD: People talk about identity in lots of ways.¹ In this worksheet, when we talk about your identities, we are talking about **the ways you think about yourself**. Which of your traits do you think of as important? You might think of yourself as creative, funny, empathetic, a careful thinker, and so on. Each of these could be one of your **personal identities**.²



SOLO EXERCISE: Write down three of your personal identities, i.e. key characteristics that are central to how you think about yourself.

1 -----

2 -----

3 -----



READ ALOUD: You also have many **social identities**. Whenever you *know and care* that you're part of a group, that group is one of your social identities. Common examples include race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, political affiliation, and favourite sports team.



SOLO EXERCISE: Write down three of your social identities, i.e. social groups that you feel part of.

1	-----
2	-----
3	-----



READ ALOUD: Our identities are really important to us. They contribute to our sense of belonging and feeling valuable. Many argue that we need to recognise and respect social identities, if we would like to eliminate injustices.³ This is because many unjust practices target selected groups of people, whose social identities come under attack.

Sometimes, however, our personal and social identities can undermine the quality of debates.

Part 1: Concerns about Identity Polarisation



READ ALOUD: You have probably heard the word “polarisation”. It is often used when describing social and political divisions. Individuals or groups can become attached to beliefs or ideas that are “poles apart” from each other, making it difficult to find common ground or to empathise with alternative viewpoints.

Do you know that there are different kinds of polarisation?⁴

Two kinds of polarisation

1 Issue polarisation happens when people’s views on an issue cluster together at (usually) two distant positions on a spectrum; some at one end, some at the other, with not many people in between.

→ E.g. Whether pineapple is an appropriate pizza topping is an **issue polarised** question.

2 Affective polarisation happens when people feel part of a group because of its views, and deeply distrust or dislike some other group because of its views. It is called “affective” because it is based on feelings (sometimes also called “affects”) that people have in favour of their own social group and against some other group.

→ E.g. An issue like Brexit is highly **affectively polarised** (have you heard how Brexiteers and Remainers talk about each other?). In this case, not only did people disagree with each other on the question of whether or not the UK should leave the EU (issue polarisation), many also had strong feelings against people in the “opposing camp”. That affected how they thought about and interacted with those who did not share their own view.



GROUP EXERCISE: Is pineapple an appropriate topping for a pizza? Why does this question represent **issue polarisation** rather than **affective polarisation**?

Write down your group's answer

WARNING! The False Middle Fallacy

Some people think that, when there are extremes of opinion, the truth usually lies in the middle. But that's the fallacy of the false middle (aka the fallacy of moderation).

Don't fall for it! The fact that an issue is highly polarised tells us nothing about where the truth is.

→ E.g. The shape of the earth is an issue polarised topic: the vast majority of people's views are clustered around the view that the earth is (roughly) spherical, but there is also a cluster of people who think it is a flat disc. But that doesn't mean the Earth is actually a half-sphere with a flat top!



GROUP EXERCISE: Some issues can be both affective-polarised and issue-polarised. Considering your family and friends, where would you place the following on the graph? The vertical axis represents how much the topic affectively polarises people (i.e. creates divisions between groups with differing viewpoints on the issue), while the horizontal axis represents how much the topic is an issue polarisation.

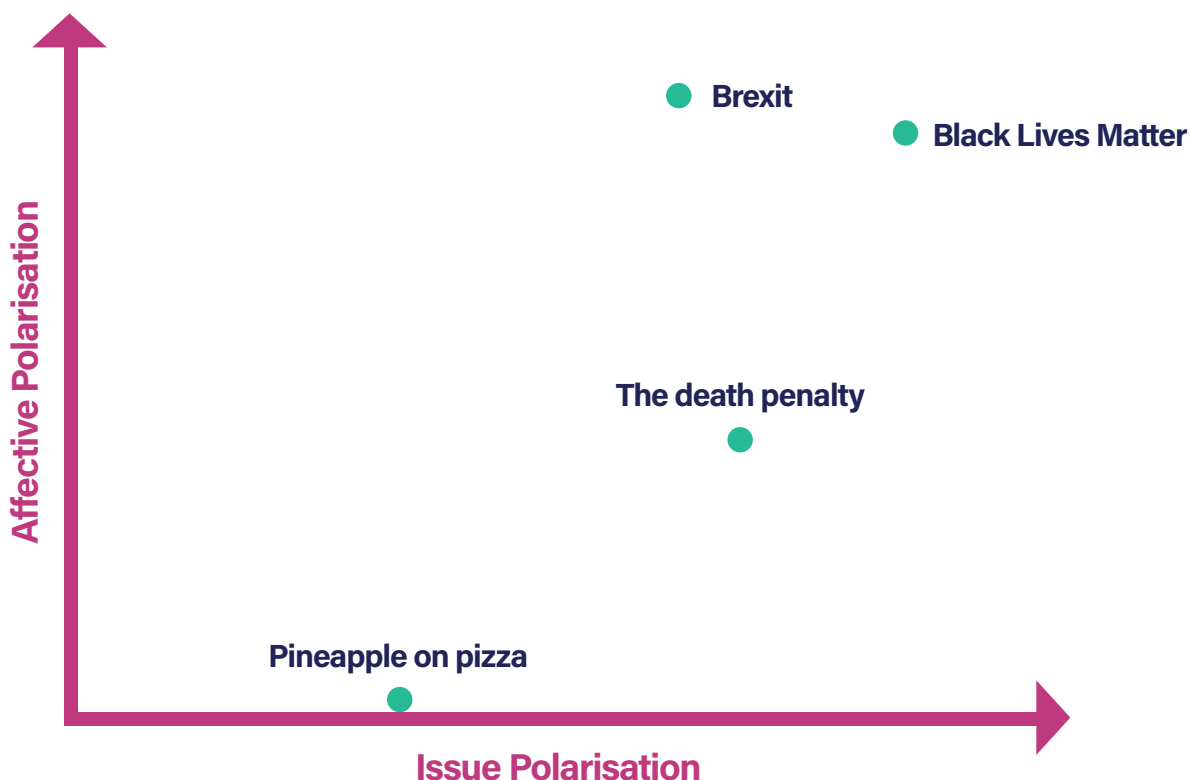
We've already placed some indicative examples, so you can see what sort of thing you're being asked to do.⁵ There might not be a definitive answer, and that is ok!



Where would you place these issues on the graph below?

- 1 **Veganism**
- 2 **Abortion**
- 3 **Climate change**

Reminder: *Issue polarisation* happens when people's views on an issue cluster at extreme ends of a spectrum, instead of being varied and spread out. *Affective polarisation* happens when people feel part of a group because of its views, and they also distrust or dislike some other group because of its views.



READ ALOUD: Affective polarisation connects to our social identities, and can make responsible and effective debate difficult by promoting a “them vs. us” mentality. Mistrust of other viewpoints is sometimes justified, but affective polarisation can make us prone to knee-jerk mistrust of whole groups of people with different viewpoints.⁶

REMEMBER!

When issue polarisation is low, you may have more common ground with the person you're debating than you might think, even if affective polarisation is high!

→ E.g. On the topic of animal rights, there tends to be high affective polarisation, but relatively low issue polarisation. This is because views about animal rights tend to be varied and they spread across a spectrum, instead of clustering at the two extremes. There are disagreements about what kind of rights animals have, which animals have them, how to attribute those rights to animals, on what basis those rights are determined, etc. Instead of focusing on the disagreements, if we change the key questions to, “Do animals' lives deserve to be protected?”, and “How shall we promote animals' wellbeing?”, we might find that many answers converge.



GROUP EXERCISE: What do the disagreements about animals rights tell us about how we debate with each other? How could we improve the way we debate with each other?

Write down your group's answer

Motivated Reasoning



READ ALOUD: Motivated reasoning is another way in which our identities can make responsible debate more difficult. Roughly speaking, motivated reasoning happens when people use reasoning to support their preferred views.⁷ For example, they might seek evidence and arguments in favour of their preferred views. They might also be biased when evaluating others' views – they might be more sceptical of views that are different from their own, or they might be less willing to consider supporting evidence for those views.

For example, you believe that pineapple is an appropriate pizza topping. Because this is what you believe, you might find it easier to come up with reasons for why pineapple may be on pizzas than to provide reasons for why it may not. Motivated reasoning might have played a role in this: you are more motivated to find reasons that support your belief than you are to find reasons that are against it.



SOLO EXERCISE:

- 1 Think of an aspect of your identity (social or personal). Then, pick an issue that you feel passionately about, and which relates to that aspect of your identity.

For example, if being pro-choice is one of your social identities, an issue you feel passionately about might be the right to abortion. Or perhaps, caring about the environment is part of your identity, and an issue you are passionate about is climate change misinformation.

Here is an aspect of my identity:

Here is an issue that I care about, which relates to that aspect of my identity:

2 Next, make a statement about that issue.

For example, it could be something like “restricting access to abortion does not reduce the number of abortions”; or “big corporations are not taking enough responsibility for their role in climate change”.

A statement that I would make about the issue is:

3 Now consider the following scenarios:

Try to think carefully and respond honestly, rather than predicting what you are supposed to say.

Scenario 1

You are scrolling through social media, and you see that someone you don't know has posted an article from a reputable source. They say that the article shows that the statement you wrote above is true. It has lots of likes.

How would you react?

- I wouldn't read it (maybe you think you don't need to)
- I'd read it with a positive attitude, looking for and expecting good points
- I'd read it skeptically, looking for and expecting errors
- I'd read it neutrally, neither expecting it to be well-argued nor poorly-argued
- I'd repost the article to share its findings with others

Scenario 2

You are scrolling through social media, and you see that someone you don't know has posted an article from a reputable source. They say that the article shows that the statement you wrote above is false. It has lots of likes.

How would you react?

- I wouldn't read it (maybe you think you don't need to)
- I'd read it with a positive attitude, looking for and expecting good points
- I'd read it skeptically, looking for and expecting errors
- I'd read it neutrally, neither expecting it to be well-argued nor poorly-argued
- I'd repost the article to share its findings with others



READ ALOUD: If you reacted the same way in both scenarios, good for you! That's impressive. If you did not, it might be a relief to hear that most of us don't. A lot of research shows that most of us judge things that threaten our identities much more harshly than things that affirm our identities.⁸

This is what we mean by the phrase "motivated reasoning". The way we reason and judge what we read or hear can be affected by our interests and motives.

This often happens when we...

- > **Seek evidence**
- > **Interpret evidence**
- > **Evaluate sources**
- > **Recall information**
- > **Notice connections between ideas**
- > **Construct arguments**

And more!



Wrap up Concerns about Identity



READ ALOUD: So, if we want to debate productively and responsibly, we should try to be conscious of the effects of **affective polarisation** and **motivated reasoning**. We should also try to do something about them.

Part 1 of this worksheet has helped you recognise the effects. Now, let's move onto **Part 2**, where we try to do something about them.

Part 2: Some Solutions



READ ALOUD: Being aware of affective polarisation and motivated reasoning is the first step in combatting them. Try to be mindful of when your identities are evoked in debate, and how that might be affecting you.⁹

For example, when you're debating with someone, and you notice that you are having a negative, sceptical reaction to what they are saying, it's worth reflecting on why. As a start, you could ask yourself the following.

- > **Have they said something false or objectionable?** Yes No

If yes, what about it is false?

Or, what about it is objectionable?

- > **Is it possible that my judgement is being clouded?** Yes No

If yes, what might be the reason(s) for why my judgement is clouded?

There are more thorough tests that you could use. **We'll introduce you to three of them.**

Bias Tests



READ ALOUD: Here are three tests you can perform mentally, to check whether your social identities are affecting your thinking in a debate.¹⁰

GOOD TO REMEMBER!

- > The tests help us to detect some common sources of bias
- > A negative result on these tests does not mean that you are *definitely* free of biases
- > Practicing the tests repeatedly helps to build the habit of checking for biases

Name

The Conformity Test

What it checks for

Are you stating an opinion just because people with whom you share a social identity also state that opinion?

How to do it

- > Ask yourself which of your social identities is most relevant to the debate you're having.
- > Try to imagine that everyone from that group had a different opinion from your own.
- > How would you feel, and what would you do?



If you'd change your mind with them, you might be experiencing a bias because you want to conform to group opinion.


What did it feel like to hold a different opinion from a group you feel you belong to? What impact did it have on your sense of identity? What was it like to imagine changing your opinion, and in what circumstances would you not have changed your view?

Example of applying the Conformity Test

You are having a debate about whether immigration restrictions are justified. You claim that they are not completely justified. You recognise that one of your social identities is being part of an immigrant community. You then imagine that everyone in your immigrant community had a different opinion from your own – they believed that immigration restrictions are wholly justified. You reflect upon how you would feel and what you would do.

Fun Fact!

Barack Obama used to run this test on his staff, to check whether they were just being "yes men".¹¹ If someone agreed with an idea he'd had, he would sometimes pretend to change his mind and challenge them to defend the idea. It is helpful to wonder whether you would think the same, if everyone in your social group changed their minds.

Name	The Double Standard Test
What it checks for	Are you judging someone more harshly than you would judge members of a group you identify with?
How to do it	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > You are judging someone from outside your identity group for what they have said or done in a debate. > Ask yourself which of your social identities is relevant to the debate. > Try to imagine that someone from a group you identify with did or said the thing you're judging. > How would you feel, and what would you do? <p> If you'd judge differently, you might be experiencing a bias due to double standards.</p> <p>What does it feel like to try judging someone from a group you do not identify with in the same way you would judge someone from a group you feel closer to? What difference do you think that could make to how you debate with them?</p>

Example of applying the Double Standard Test

You are judging someone for saying that strict immigration policies should be in place to control the population in the UK. You recognise that one of your social identities is being part of an immigrant community. You then imagine that someone from your immigrant community said the same thing. You reflect upon how you would feel and do.



SOLO EXERCISE:

We are prone to imposing double standards (i.e. being selectively positive, or selectively sceptical), when we engage in debates over affectively polarised issues: if you feel distrust and disdain towards someone, it is easy to judge them more harshly than you would judge others. Can you come up with an example of this, considering your own experience?

An affectively polarised issue:

.....

.....

How double standards might have affected how you yourself were treated in a disagreement:

.....

.....

How double standards might have affected how you treated others in a disagreement:

.....

.....

Name

The Selective Sceptic Test

What it checks for

Would you be more sceptical of any argument (regardless of its merits), if it was used to support a view different from your own?

How to do it

- Ask yourself which social identity is relevant to the debate.
- Check: is the argument that you're evaluating presented by someone who shares that social identity?
- If so and you agree with them, then imagine someone presented an argument with all the same strengths (e.g. lots of supporting evidence, thoughtful analysis, logical conclusions), but for the opposite point of view. Would you still think that it was a good argument? Would you take it as seriously as an argument you already agreed with?
- If not and you disagree with them, then imagine someone presented an argument with all the same weaknesses (e.g. no solid evidence, careless analysis, tenuous conclusions) but for a point of view you agree with. Would you still think that it was a bad argument?



If you judge arguments that promote opposing views more critically than the ones you agree with, you might be being selectively sceptical. Ideally, we should apply the same standards when judging the merits of all arguments, whether we agree with them or not; but we often show bias in being more sceptical of arguments we disagree with.

Example of applying the Selective Sceptic Test

Someone presents an argument for the view that individuals should be able to migrate to any country because they have the right to freedom of movement. You disagree; you think that having the right to freedom of movement does not mean having a "free pass" to migrate to just any country.

Why do you find the argument presented by someone else unconvincing? Is it because the argument itself is flawed? Or is it because you are not inclined to agree with it in the first place – or because you are not inclined to agree with someone who has a different social identity to your own?

To test if you are being a selective sceptic, you first recognise that one of your social identities is being a native, while the person who presents the argument has an immigrant background. Is this affecting your judgement?

You now imagine that someone from your social group has presented the argument. Are you more or less inclined to disagree? Do you think the argument has as many flaws as when it was presented by someone from a different social group?

Next imagine that someone has presented an argument for the view that you hold, but with the same flaws you identified in the opposing argument (e.g. poor logic, lack of evidence, incoherent, etc). Would you judge this argument as critically as the one you disagreed with?



GROUP EXERCISE: Let's see if you can apply these tests. What test would you use to check for bias in each of the scenarios below?

Scenario 1

Someone from the political party that you dislike was caught lying. People in your preferred party claim that this is a serious disgrace. People from the opposing party are happy to ignore it. You think that what the politician did is very disgraceful, but you want to check for bias.



Test

Scenario 2

You identify as a feminist. A new film has been receiving great reviews, which claim that the film is a "feminist masterpiece". You watch the film and think you like it, but you aren't really sure.



Scenario 3

You see an headline that claims that the attached article "DESTROYS" a view that is connected to one of your social identities. You think, "I'm going to read it and DESTROY their argument!". You pause and wonder whether you might be experiencing a little bias.



Alternative Identities



READ ALOUD: Imagine you are in a heated debate that seems totally intractable. Nobody is budging and everyone is getting quite worked up. It is easy for things to get messy like this when people feel their identities are under threat.

The Self-affirmation Theory

Several psychological studies support something called the **self-affirmation theory**. The idea is, it can help to spend a moment focusing on aspects of your identity that are not under attack.¹²

Doing so can make you feel more open-minded and less prone to knee-jerk distrust. If you are able to pause the debate, and discuss such aspects of your identities with the person you are debating with, they may be prompted to be more open-minded and trusting too.



SOLO EXERCISE: We encourage you to revisit the three personal identities that you have listed at the beginning of this worksheet. Is any of them **unlikely to be under threat** in heated debates?

Perhaps you think of yourself as a good friend or sibling; perhaps you have a hobby that brings you joy; perhaps you take pride in your sense of humour.

An identity that is unlikely to be under threat in a heated debate is:

.....

Try recalling this the next time you find yourself feeling that some of your identities are under threat in a debate. Can you bring aspects of your identity into a difficult debate which help to establish common ground and diffuse tension?

Conclusion

In worksheet 2, we have:

- ✓ Learned what identity is (including social identities).
- ✓ Learned ways that our identities undermine our debating, e.g. through affective polarisation and motivated reasoning.
- ✓ Learned ways that we can combat those negative effects, e.g. through mindfulness, bias tests, and self-affirmation theory.

But remember, identity isn't all bad! Our concepts and understandings of identities can influence actions in a positive way. In Worksheet 5, we're going to look at that in greater detail.

In the next worksheet, you'll learn about **Informed Debate**.

Bibliography

Benson, R., Duffy, B., Murkin, G., Hesketh, R., Hewlett, K., Gottfried, G., Page, B., & Skinner, G. (2021) *The four sides in the UK's culture wars* (London: The Policy Institute, King's College London) <https://doi.org/10.18742/pub01-053>

Bort, J. (2018) "Obama describes what being in the Situation Room is like - and his advice anyone can use to make hard decisions" *The Independent*, 1st June 2018. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/obama-situation-room-white-house-president-decision-making-a8378186.html> (Accessed 01-09-22)

Cohen, G. L., Aronson, J., & Steele, C. M. (2000). When beliefs yield to evidence: Reducing biased evaluation by affirming the self. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 26, 1151-1164.

Cohen, G. L., Sherman, D. K., Bastardi, A., Hsu, L., McGoey, M., & Ross, L. (2007). Bridging the partisan divide: Self-affirmation reduces ideological closed-mindedness and inflexibility in negotiation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 93, 415-430.

Cohen, G. L. (2012) "Identity, Belief, and Bias" in Jon Hanson, and John Jost (eds), *Ideology, Psychology, and Law, Series in Political Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 385-403, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199737512.003.0015>

Coulmas, Florian (2019) *Identity: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

Diangelo, Robin (2018) *White Fragility* (London: Penguin)

Duffy, B., Hewlett, K., McCrae, J., & Hall, J. (2019) *Divided Britain? Polarisation and fragmentation trends in the UK* (London: The Policy Institute, King's College London)

Galef, Julia (2021) *The Scout Mindset: Why Some People See Things Clearly and Others Don't* (London: Piatkus).

Kennedy, K. A., & Pronin, E. (2012). Bias perception and the spiral of conflict. In J. Hanson (Ed.), *Ideology, psychology, and law* (pp. 410-446). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199737512.003.0017>

Klein, Ezra (2020) *Why We're Polarised* (London: Profile Books).

Novaes, C. D. (2020) "The Role of Trust in Argumentation" *Informal Logic*, 40:2, 205-236. <https://doi.org/10.22329/il.v40i2.6328>

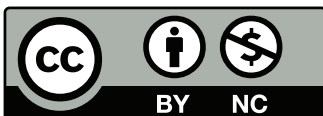
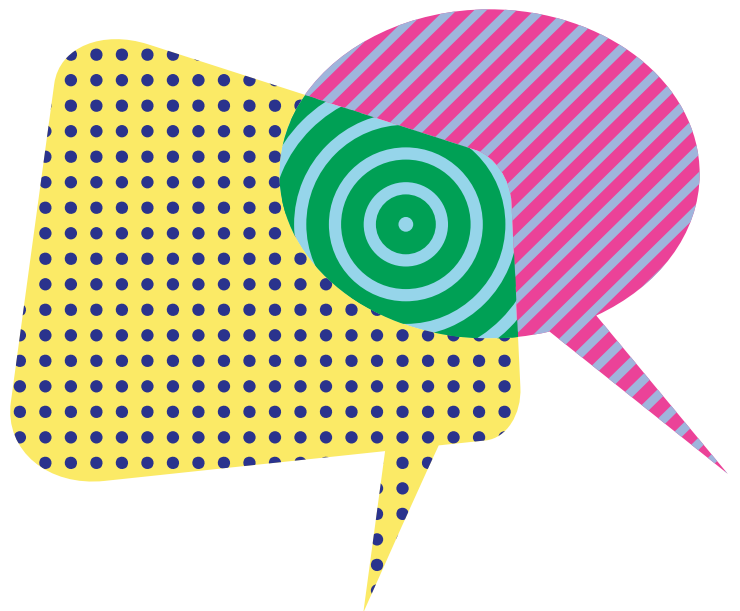
Uhlmann, E., & Cohen, G. L. (2007). "I think it, therefore it's true": Effects of self perceived objectivity on hiring discrimination. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 104, 207-223.

Notes

- 1 For example, see discussion in Coulmas (2019, Introduction).
- 2 Some theories of identity say we have each have many identities. Others say we have one identity with many aspects. This is just two different ways of describing the same thing. In this worksheet, we use the former way of speaking, but you can imagine we're using the latter, if that makes more sense to you.
- 3 Diangelo (2018, Author's Note) gives a characteristic and pithy version of this argument.
- 4 Duffy et al (2019).
- 5 The placement of Black Lives Matter and The Death Penalty roughly reflect the data in Benson et al (2021). The placement of Brexit roughly reflects the data in Duffy et al (2019).
- 6 For more on why a disposition to mistrust makes responsible debate difficult, see Novaes (2020).
- 7 Wason selection task (Wason, 1968); Deanna Kuhn's study (1991) asks participants to express their opinions about certain social issues and to justify them subsequently - they readily provide reasons that support their own positions, but most fail to think of counterarguments when asked to present some.
- 8 See Cohen (2012) for discussion.
- 9 For more on this kind of mindfulness, see Ezra Klein (2020, final chapter).
- 10 These tests are taken and modified from Galef (2021, Chapter 5).
- 11 Bort (2018).
- 12 Cohen et al. (2000) and Cohen et al. (2007).



RSE **YOUNG
ACADEMY**
OF SCOTLAND



<https://responsibledebate.org> | www.youngacademyofscotland.org.uk

 **YoungAcademySco**

 **YoungAcademySco**