**////Title: Reducing Political Sectarianism to Introduce Important Legislation**

**////Standfirst:**

In the United States,public opinions have become increasingly polarised. This polarisation leads to ‘othering’, which describes how one group of people can view another group as very different from themselves and depict them in negative ways. Dr Megan Schraedley at West Chester University recently carried out a study exploring how othering arises in the context of US politics, and how it can be disrupted. Understanding how this destructive phenomenon can be disrupted could help policymakers to successfully introduce important legislation.

**////Main text:**

The Democratic and Republican parties have become increasingly polarised in their views on numerous topics, including gun policy, climate change, immigration, abortion, LGBT rights, racial justice, and healthcare.

Recent studies have shown that Democrats and Republicans express more hatred for members of the opposing party than love for their own, and often even adapt their views to be more in line with those of the party. Such polarisation leads to political sectarianism, and the so-called ‘othering’ of individuals who support opposing parties. Othering describes treating a group of people as alien to oneself, and often viewing them in very negative ways.

Othering can increase hostility and widen social divides, painting others as universally unintelligent, unstable, dishonest and corrupt, solely based on their political affiliations. This can reduce the effectiveness of policymaking efforts and can lead to conflicts.

Gaining a better understanding of how othering arises and how it can be reduced could improve social cohesion and make it easier to introduce important policies. Dr Megan Schraedley, an Assistant Professor of Communication at West Chester University, recently explored how othering arises and how it can be disrupted within the polarised political landscape of the USA.

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In a political context, othering can be the outcome of a phenomenon known as language convergence/meaning divergence, or ‘LC/MD’ for short. LC/MD occurs when people attribute different meanings to common words or expressions.

When policymakers use terms that can be interpreted in various ways by different listeners, they can create the illusion of a shared meaning. However, when the illusion of shared meaning becomes fractured, individuals often view those who take a divergent meaning as unintelligent, immoral, or psychologically unstable.

In her recent paper, Dr Schraedley examined LC/MD processes and how they relate to othering and the management of conflict. To do this, Dr Schraedley and her colleague Dr Debbie Dougherty, a Professor of Communication at University of Missouri, connect two key concepts from communication theory, namely LC/MD theory and the idea of pragmatic ambiguity.

Pragmatic ambiguity is the ambiguity that arises when concepts or goals that allow for different courses of action are used to convey a general appearance of unity and shared opinions. For example, while more job opportunities for citizens might be a desirable outcome for most of the population, Republicans and Democrats might have a different idea of what this would look like.

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In their paper, Dr Schraedley and Dr Dougherty explain how policymakers can disrupt othering to manage polarised views when trying to pass new legislation. To do this, the researchers particularly focused on how politicians attempted to reduce othering and manage the public’s different opinions while trying to introduce new food security policies.

The term ‘food security’ refers to the ability to secure enough quality food for an active and healthy life. Given that one-third of the Earth’s population does not have easy access to enough healthy food, food security is a highly pressing global matter.

Dr Schraedley and Dr Dougherty explored how policymakers managed divergent meanings while introducing the Global Food Security Act or ‘GFSA’. This law, which was passed in 2016, promotes healthy lifestyles, good nutrition, and food security worldwide.

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As part of their study, the researchers interviewed 24 policymakers who had played a part in writing, promoting, and passing the GFSA. They also reviewed a wide pool of documents related to food security and the passage of the GFSA, including publicly available meeting recordings, government reports, policy drafts, and scientific papers. Finally, they analysed the interviews and documents to better understand how pragmatic ambiguity was used to create an illusion of unity and pass the GFSA.

While the 24 policymakers all appeared to agree on the general purpose of the GFSA legislation, the content and reasons for passing the legislation were subject to debate in Congress, due to the upcoming presidential election.

Many of the respondents highlighted the polarisation in place at the time, as well as the negative views and distrust that people in their party had towards members of the opposing party. Initially, two key discourses were used to increase support for the GFSA. One was the ‘Global Good’ discourse, which referred to the moral goal of reducing hunger, and the other was the ‘National Security’ discourse, which focused on how US citizens would be protected from issues arising due to food insecurity.

At the time, policymakers were sometimes encouraged to use these discourses in ambiguous ways, leaving them open to interpretation. For example, food security could be seen as protecting people from malnutrition and starvation, decreasing obesity, or increasing access to local food. Dr Schraedley and Dr Dougherty explain how policymakers used pragmatic ambiguity to converge these simultaneous meanings, to create a feeling of unity which enabled the GFSA to be passed. They also speculate that the upcoming presidential election may have made the new legislation easier to pass, as it was overshadowed by the election in the media.

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The team’s recent work offers valuable insights about the ways in which the process of othering can be disrupted by policymakers to ensure that legislations appeal to more people, regardless of their political affiliation. The same approach could be used to aid the introduction of other important policies, such as those relating to climate action or healthcare.

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This SciPod is a summary of the paper ‘Creating and disrupting othering during policymaking in a polarized context’, in the Journal of Communication, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqab042>

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