

# Understanding the 'Us Vs Them' Division Through the Notion of Responsibility

Written by Xin Zhao

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## Understanding the 'Us Vs Them' Division Through the Notion of Responsibility

<https://www.e-ir.info/2021/05/25/understanding-the-us-vs-them-division-through-the-notion-of-responsibility/>

XIN ZHAO, MAY 25 2021

The notion of responsibility is seen as 'a notoriously awkward concept' in international relations and politics (IRP) (Erskine, 2003b: 7). It generally refers to the obligations placed on different actors and can be understood from either a 'prospective' or a 'retrospective' perspective (Erskine, 2003b: 8). Loke (2016: 854) further interpreted the prospective nature as being 'prescriptive (what actors should do)' and the retrospective nature as being 'evaluative (a basis upon which evaluations can be made).' Specifically, being prospective aims to 'assign and distribute moral burdens' and being retrospective aims to 'point fingers and apportion blame,' which 'is *already* a prevalent part of the practice of international politics' (Erskine, 2003b: 8, emphasis in original).

The application of the notion of responsibility as blame is an established practice of IRP (Erskine, 2003b). State actors strategically construct the notion of responsibility in controversial international affairs, such as international trade, environmental protection, and pandemic mitigation (Zhao, 2019, 2020), aiming to legitimize their international stances and behaviors with/against others (Roselle et al., 2014).

This article proposes an integrated framework of the notion of responsibility to understand the "us vs them" dichotomy in politics-related discourses. The framework was developed based on studies of the idea of responsibility in political science, especially in IRP (e.g. Erskine, 2003a; Loke, 2016), and studies of the topos of responsibility in critical discourse analysis (CDA) (e.g. Blackledge, 2005; Reisigl and Wodak, 2001; Wright and Brookes, 2019). Topos refers to the 'parts of argumentation that belong to the obligatory, either explicit or inferable, premises' (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001: 74-75). Using the notion of responsibility, both bodies of scholarship put the main focus on the discursive construction of the negative them (the opposition group and/or their allies) and seldom on those of the positive us (I and/or my allies). Nevertheless, others are often represented along with us in the discursive construction of the us and other division (van Dijk, 1998). The proposed framework aims to expand the explanatory power of the notion of responsibility in the us and them ideological confrontation in politics-related discourses.

In CDA (especially the strand using the discourse-historical approach), the topos of responsibility is identified as a scheme of argumentation aiming to justify the positive or negative attributions of certain actors (Wodak, 2001) and thus to reproduce the positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001). The application of the topos follows the logic that 'because a state or a group of persons is responsible for the emergence of specific problems, it or they should act in order to find solutions of these problems,' and thus to justify the us and them dichotomy (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001: 78). The logic echoes what has been identified in IRP studies, i.e. holding an agent to account for wrongdoing (retrospective/evaluative) and assigning duties to others (prospective/prescriptive). Empirical studies have found the extensive application of the topos of responsibility in, for example, politics-related discourses on immigration issues (e.g. Blackledge, 2005; Rubio-Carbonero and Zapata-Barrero, 2017; Wright and Brookes, 2019).

The above scholarly discussions on the notion of responsibility in IRP and CDA mainly focused on the agency of others, i.e. attributing blame to and requesting duties from others, in the (re)production of the us and them division. A lack of foci has been put on the role of the notion of responsibility in constructing the positive me/us. Therefore, the potential of the notion of responsibility has not been fully realized to more comprehensively understand how it can

# Understanding the 'Us Vs Them' Division Through the Notion of Responsibility

Written by Xin Zhao

legitimize the positive or negative attributions of certain agencies (Wodak, 2001), construct the positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001), and (re)produce the us and them dichotomy.

The discursive construction of the us and them dichotomy often combines the depiction of others with us (van Dijk, 1998), especially in the discourses of 'group conflict or competition' (p. 275). Van Dijk (1998) proposed the theoretical framework of an ideological square to uncover the discursive reproduction of the ideology of positive us and negative them. The ideological discourse structure (van Dijk, 1998: 267) was detailed as:

1. Express/emphasize information that is positive about Us;
2. Express/emphasize information that is negative about Them;
3. Suppress/de-emphasize information that is positive about Them;
4. Suppress/de-emphasize information that is negative about Us.

Among a range of discursive strategies to fulfil the ideological square, van Dijk (1998: 276) mentioned 'the distribution of agency, responsibility or blame,' but he did not specify how. Theoretical integration between van Dijk's (1998) theory and the above scholarship in IRP (Erskine, 2003a; Loke, 2016) and CDA (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001) can help to enrich the explanatory power of the notion of responsibility in constructing the us and them division.

The aspect of blaming others for wrongdoings and/or faults in IRP (Erskine, 2003a; Loke, 2016) and CDA (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001) coincides with the second aspect of the ideological square, i.e. expressing/emphasizing information that is negative about them (van Dijk, 1998). Using the notion of responsibility as blame has been widely applied in politics-related discourses to construct and normalize the negative them. For example, China's state-run English newspaper *China Daily* blamed Trump's America for protectionism and anti-globalization (Pan et al., 2020); British right-wing newspapers blamed the im/migrants from the European Union as threats to the UK's security and wellbeing (Tong and Zuo, 2019); texts from the Indonesian Islamic Defender Front blamed the Ahmadiyya sect (a self-defined sect of Islam) as the hijacker, enemy, and traitor of Islam (Irawan, 2017); George W Bush's public speeches on military action in Iraq blamed it as being a threat to US's national security (Abid and Manan, 2016).

The dimension of assigning duties to others in IRP (Erskine, 2003a; Loke, 2016) and CDA (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001) echoes the third element of the ideological square, i.e. suppressing/de-emphasizing information that is positive about them (van Dijk, 1998). When others, such as immigrants, were assigned with the duties to deal with their issues by themselves (e.g. learning to speak English), they were treated as accountable actors who need external pressure, such as regulation, pressure, or praise, to realize certain standards of performance (Bivins, 2006). Accountable actors are seen to possess 'a developed moral sense and a fair idea of social conventions and moral principles' (Bivins, 2006: 23). The nature of relying on external pressure instead of a high level of autonomy, however, suppresses the positive connotation of others' accountability.

The notion of responsibility can also be used to construct the positive us. Responsible actors, in contrast to accountable actors, are driven by self-motivation to fulfil the appropriate moral criteria (Bivins, 2006). Representing us as responsible actors highlights the positive attributes of us, which is consistent with the first aspect of the ideological square, i.e. expressing/emphasizing information that is positive about us (van Dijk, 1998). Extant studies have found expansive applications of this discursive strategy in politics-related discourses, for instance by highlighting the proactive stance and effective measures taken by the central government of China in tackling air pollution in *China Daily* (Liu and Li, 2017) and in the HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment in the state-run Xinhua News Agency (Wu, 2006), or an emphasis on the US's initiatives of providing humanistic cares and advancing democracy in the world in Bush's speeches (Abid and Manan, 2016).

A positive us can also be constructed through denying blames (van Dijk, 1992), or blame avoidance (Hansson, 2015), which is consistent with suppressing what is negative about us in the ideological square (van Dijk, 1998). Actors in power, such as state actors, can deny the accusations of faults or wrongdoings through strategies of, for example, 'act-denial ('I did not do/say that at all') and 'intention-denial ('I did not mean that', 'You got me wrong')' (van Dijk, 1992: 92), to (re)produce a positive self-image. Similarly, IRP scholarship also found that nation states

# Understanding the 'Us Vs Them' Division Through the Notion of Responsibility

Written by Xin Zhao

often manoeuvre the discursive strategy of defensive denial, i.e. 'resisting or denying negative discourses about the Self,' to construct a positive international image (Pan et al., 2020: 58).

The above review of literature leads to the following integrated framework of the notion of responsibility which can facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of the "us vs them" dichotomy in politics-related discourses. The framework will be presented in more detail in my forthcoming *Global Media and Communication* article "Constructing the us and them dichotomy through the notion of responsibility: An integrated framework".

1. Express/emphasize information that is positive about Us: Duties claimed by us as a result of self-motivation;
2. Express/emphasize information that is negative about Them: Other's faults;
3. Suppress/de-emphasize information that is positive about Them: Other's duties upon request;
4. Suppress/de-emphasize information that is negative about Us: Exemption of our faults.

Scholars in IRP and CDA, as well as media and communication studies, could test the applicability of the proposed framework in politics-related discourses, especially those on conflictual issues. Recent years have witnessed the divisions between countries and regions, such as the China-US and US-Mexico tensions, and Brexit. It is of vital importance to understand how those in power, such as state actors, construct and legitimize their stances and behaviors through the notion of responsibility and thus to (re)inforce political, economic, cultural, and social divisions.

## References

- Abid RZ and Manan SA (2016) Constructing the "self" and the "other" in Bush's political discourse before and after the Iraq war (2002–2008). *Journal of Language and Politics* 15(6): 710–726. DOI: 10.1075/jlp.15.6.03abi.
- Bivins T (2006) Responsibility and accountability. In: Fitzpatrick K and Bronstein C (eds) *Ethics in Public Relations: Responsible Advocacy*. Sage, pp. 19–38.
- Blackledge A (2005) *Discourse and Power in a Multilingual World*. Discourse Approaches to Politics, Society and Culture. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Pub.
- Erskine T (ed.) (2003a) *Can Institutions Have Responsibilities? Collective Moral Agency and International Relations*. Global Issues. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Erskine T (2003b) Introduction: Making sense of 'responsibility' in international relations- Key questions and concepts. In: Erskine T (ed.) *Can Institutions Have Responsibilities? Collective Moral Agency and International Relations*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1–16.
- Hansson S (2015) Discursive strategies of blame avoidance in government: A framework for analysis. *Discourse & Society* 26(3): 297–322. DOI: 10.1177/0957926514564736.
- Irawan AM (2017) 'They are not Muslims': A critical discourse analysis of the Ahmadiyya sect issue in Indonesia. *Discourse & Society* 28(2): 162–181. DOI: 10.1177/0957926516685462.
- Liu M and Li C (2017) Competing discursive constructions of China's smog in Chinese and Anglo-American English-language newspapers: A corpus-assisted discourse study. *Discourse & Communication* 11(4): 386–403.
- Loke B (2016) Unpacking the politics of great power responsibility: Nationalist and Maoist China in international order-building. *European Journal of International Relations* 22(4): 847–871. DOI: 10.1177/1354066115611968.
- Pan C, Isakhan B and Nwokora Z (2020) Othering as soft-power discursive practice: China Daily's construction of Trump's America in the 2016 presidential election. *Politics* 40(1): 54–69. DOI: 10.1177/0263395719843219.
- Reisigl M and Wodak R (2001) *Discourse and Discrimination: Rhetorics of Racism and Antisemitism*. London:

# Understanding the 'Us Vs Them' Division Through the Notion of Responsibility

Written by Xin Zhao

Routledge.

Roselle L, Miskimmon A and O'Loughlin B (2014) Strategic narrative: A new means to understand soft power. *Media, War & Conflict* 7(1): 70–84. DOI: 10.1177/1750635213516696.

Rubio-Carbonero G and Zapata-Barrero R (2017) Monitoring discriminatory political discourse on immigration: A pilot study in Catalonia. *Discourse & Society* 28(2): 204–225. DOI: 10.1177/0957926516685464.

Tong J and Zuo L (2019) Othering the European Union through constructing moral panics over 'im/migrant(s)' in the coverage of migration in three British newspapers, 2011–2016. *International Communication Gazette* 81(5): 445–469. DOI: 10.1177/1748048518802237.

van Dijk TA (1992) Discourse and the denial of racism. *Discourse & Society* 3(1): 87–118.

van Dijk TA (1998) *Ideology: A Multidisciplinary Approach*. Sage.

Wodak R (2001) The discourse-historical approach. In: Wodak R and Meyer M (eds) *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*. London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage, pp. 63–94.

Wright D and Brookes G (2019) 'This is England, speak English!': A corpus-assisted critical study of language ideologies in the right-leaning British press. *Critical Discourse Studies* 16(1): 56–83. DOI: 10.1080/17405904.2018.1511439.

Wu M (2006) Framing AIDS in China: A comparative analysis of US and Chinese wire news coverage of HIV/AIDS in China. *Asian Journal of Communication* 16(3): 251–272. DOI: 10.1080/01292980600857781.

Zhao X (2019) Journalistic construction of congruence: Chinese media's representation of common but differentiated responsibilities in environmental protection. *Journalism*. DOI: 10.1177/1464884919837425.

Zhao X (2020) How China's state actors create a "us vs US" world during Covid-19 pandemic on social media. *Media and Communication* 8(2): 452–457. DOI: 10.17645/mac.v8i2.3187.

---

## About the author:

**Dr. Xin Zhao** is a Lecturer at the Department of Communication and Journalism at Bournemouth University. Her research lies at the intersections of international communication, international relations and politics. She is particularly interested in the discursive constructions of the notion of responsibility on different media platforms. She has published in journals including *Journalism*, *Journalism Studies*, *Asian Journal of Communication*, *Media and Communication*, and *Global Media and Communication*.