

to such cycles of violence. Violence is not rare. It happens so frequently that we rarely stop to ask ourselves why. Why does it happen? Is it an outcome of history, or race, or politics—or is there something fundamentally irrational in us that encourages conflict, that causes us to look at the same event and, depending on our point of view, see it in totally different terms?

Leonard Lee (a professor at Columbia), Shane Frederick (a professor at MIT), and I didn't have any answers to these profound questions. But in a search for the root of this human condition, we decided to set up a series of simple experiments to explore how previously held impressions can cloud our point of view. We came up with a simple test—one in which we would not use religion, politics, or even sports as the indicator. We would use glasses of beer.

YOU REACH THE entrance to Walker by climbing a set of broad steps between towering Greek columns. Once inside (and after turning right), you enter two rooms with carpeting that predates the advent of electric light, furniture to match, and a smell that has the unmistakable promise of alcohol, packs of peanuts, and good company. Welcome to the Muddy Charles—one of MIT's two pubs, and the location for a set of studies that Leonard, Shane, and I would be conducting over the following weeks. The purpose of our experiments would be to determine whether people's expectations influence their views of subsequent events—more specifically, whether bar patrons' expectations for a certain kind of beer would shape their perception of its taste.

Let me explain this further. One of the beers that would be served to the patrons of the Muddy Charles would be Budweiser. The second would be what we fondly called MIT Brew. What's MIT Brew? Basically Budweiser, plus a "secret