

the crux of the study was just beginning. What truly interested the researchers was how long it would take the participants to walk down the hallway as they left the building. Sure enough, the participants in the experimental group were affected by the “elderly” words: their walking speed was considerably slower than that of a control group who had not been primed. And remember, the primed participants were not themselves elderly people being reminded of their frailty—they were undergraduate students at NYU.

ALL THESE EXPERIMENTS teach us that expectations are more than the mere anticipation of a boost from a fizzy Coke. Expectations enable us to make sense of a conversation in a noisy room, despite the loss of a word here and there, and likewise, to be able to read text messages on our cell phones, despite the fact that some of the words are scrambled. And although expectations can make us look foolish from time to time, they are also very powerful and useful.

So what about our football fans and the game-winning pass? Although both friends were watching the same game, they were doing so through markedly different lenses. One saw the pass as in bounds. The other saw it as out. In sports, such arguments are not particularly damaging—in fact, they can be fun. The problem is that these same biased processes can influence how we experience other aspects of our world. These biased processes are in fact a major source of escalation in almost every conflict, whether Israeli-Palestinian, American-Iraqi, Serbian-Croatian, or Indian-Pakistani.

In all these conflicts, individuals from both sides can read similar history books and even have the same facts taught to them, yet it is very unusual to find individuals