THE NEXT GENERATION'S IMAGE OF AMERICANS

Attitudes and Beliefs Held by Teen-Agers in Twelve Countries

A PRELIMINARY RESEARCH REPORT

by

Margaret H. DeFleur, Ph.D.
Associate Professor

and

Melvin L. DeFleur, Ph.D.
Professor

College of Communication
Boston University

NOTE: This is a preliminary report of research results (in part). It is being made available online to the news media. A complete report will be prepared and published at a later time.

AN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A total of 1,259 high school students in twelve countries (median age = 17) responded to a carefully constructed Likert attitude scale, translated to the relevant languages. The scale contained 12 evaluative statements about the characteristics, values and behavior of Americans as people (not the U.S. government, its policies or actions). The attitude scale was also designed to yield assessments of influences on the subjects from mass communication content imported from the U.S. and other western countries. The 12 countries involved were Saudi-Arabia, Bahrain, South Korea, Mexico, China, Spain, Taiwan, Dominican Republic, Pakistan, Nigeria, Italy and Argentina. Access to these young people was gained through personal ties with high school teachers and administrators in each country. This by-passed the need to get the approval from government authorities (which is difficult in any country and not possible in some).

The results are presented in 28 easy-to-read charts with explanations of each. They show that members of the next generation studied in nearly all of the countries appear to hold consistently negative attitudes toward Americans as people. Only those in Argentina were positive. The profiles of evaluative beliefs about Americans described by the twelve statements in the scale varied considerably from country-to-country. This indicates that the dimensions and bases for negative attitudes were by no means the same in each—and would be difficult to change through the use of any uniform communication strategy.

Three related theories of media influences are discussed to try and explain how negative depictions of Americans in movies and TV programs may have influenced the beliefs of many of the subjects—along with other factors. The findings suggest that problems for Americans are likely to continue into the foreseeable future in terms of terrorism threats, public health issues related to stress and possible economic problems related to the negative assessments of the next generation.

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Attitudes and Beliefs Held by Teen-Agers in Twelve Countries

This preliminary report presents selected findings obtained from of a study of 1,259 teen-agers. Both their general attitudes and a number of their specific beliefs about Americans were assessed in twelve countries. These counties are located in six different regions of the world—South Asia, East Asia, Latin America, Europe, Africa and the Near East. This was not an assessment of these young peoples' views of the U.S. government, its official policies, positions or actions. It was a study of how high school students in these twelve countries view Americans as people. Its major conclusion is that the majority of the young people studied had quite negative views.[1]

The teen-agers studied responded to a questionnaire that included a twelve-item Likert attitude scale designed to assess their *overall attitudes toward Americans*. This instrument also provided for three separate subscales, each based on certain items within the overall attitude questionnaire. One subscale provided information about influences of *depictions of Americans in mass media entertainment content* (movies and television programs) as sources for their views. A second subscale measured the degree to which the teen-agers believe that *Americans are cultural imperialists* and the third assessed their acceptance of the idea that *Americans have humanitarian values*. Additional items included in the questionnaire focused on the personal characteristics of the subjects. These items were designed to aid in understanding variations in the views and feelings among different categories of teen-agers.

The first section that follows discusses *background issues and general considerations* that provided a rationale for the research. These are what prompted the authors to undertake this study. Three major perspectives are used in this discussion: One is political. Here, the issue is what are the prospects for future acts of hostility when a generation of teen-agers around the

world have already developed distinctly negative views about Americans? The second is a public health perspective: The issue here is what will be the result for the American people, in terms of feelings of anxieties, fear and stress over a long period if danger from hostile acts are likely to continue over a long period?[2] The third perspective is economic. What are the possible consequences for the American economy when the majority of young people in many parts of the world—who will soon become consumers and economic decision-makers—already have negative beliefs and feelings about Americans?

The second section of the report sets forth the *objectives* of the study in detailed terms. As will be noted, the major task was to measure with as much precision as possible how the next generation in the countries where young people were studied currently regards Americans. A second objective was to try to understand the sources of their feelings. In particular, an attempt was made to determine the possible influence on their views of the entertainment content of the mass media. Specifically, the question is do the ways in which movies and television programming (produced in the U.S.) depict Americans and their ways of life in unrealistic and negative ways.

In a third section of the report, the *methods and procedures* used to gather the data are described in detail. As will be explained, the study has methodological limitations, particularly when judged against the most rigorous textbook standards of survey sampling advocated by social scientists. These limitations will be brought out in full and their implications examined. At the same time, as will be explained, this research enjoyed certain methodological advantages that are not normally available to those who set out to study opinions about Americans among the young in foreign countries.

The description of the methods used is followed by a fourth major section of the report in which the *details of the results* obtained are set forth in a number of quantitative tables and charts. For the most part the results are explained in descriptive, rather than inferential, terms. What this means is that the use of complex statistical analyses based on probability theory has been minimized. The intention is to make the quantitative nature of the results plainly apparent

to non-statistical readers.

In a separate section of the report, these results are *interpreted* within the perspectives of three theories from the field of communication. These theories can be of help as possible explanations of the ways in which the attitudes and beliefs of the teen-age subjects were acquired. This is an important background issue needed for trying to design possible strategies that might be used if efforts are made to modify the negative views of teen-agers in the countries studied.

Finally, in a final section of the report, certain potential *strategies for changing* the negative impressions of Americans held by teen-agers around the world are discussed. Achieving such a goal would be a daunting challenge, to say the least. Altering the impressions that individuals have of other people can be very difficult. The present investigation offers no magic bullet to achieve that result. Social psychologists and communication scholars have found that even the earliest initial impressions of people—the kind formed quickly when people first meet and based on only a few visible characteristics—are stubbornly resistant to change. Impressions over a longer period, and based on deeply established attitudes and beliefs, may be even more difficult to change. Yet, this does not mean that no such effort should be made. If any strategies for changing negative views of Americans held by young people around the world to more positive ones are suggested by the present findings, then it may be worthwhile to pursue them.

BACKGROUND

By the beginning of the 21st century, the United States had emerged as the sole superpower in the world. No other nation even approaches its dominance in either military might or economic power. Expenditures by the Pentagon to support the American armed forces will be nearly $400 billion next year—which is greater than what will be spent on their military establishments by the next fifteen nations combined. In spite of the ups and downs of the stock market, the American economy is still twice that of Japan, the second largest in the world.[3]

Looked at in another way, the United States has a mere 4.7% of the world's population. However, in terms of GDP, in recent years it has provided nearly a third of all the goods produced in the world (31.2%). On defense it consistently spends more than a third of the amount spent by all countries in the world combined (36.3%). Critics claim that the U.S. consumes more resources per person than other nations.[4] And finally, the amount invested in research and development by Americans annually is close to half that spent by all other nations taken together (40.6%).[5] Given this staggeringly dominant position of economic and military power in world affairs, it is little wonder that it arouses strong, and often negative, emotions among people in other countries.

That is probably inevitable and it probably will hold true over time. Good deeds done in the past do not count for much. The United States by any overall measure has been a good world citizen. It has helped rid the world of a number of unacceptable regimes and dictators and has provided many kinds of assistance to other nations. However, there seems to be no historical balance sheet of international behavior, by which people in other counties weigh past contributions of the United States against their current grievances. It does not matter much that, during much of the twentieth century, the U.S. did many things at great cost to its citizens to stop aggression on a world-wide basis, to rebuild nations devastated by war, to stop or prevent the invasions and atrocities in various countries by military actions of aggressors, to supply vast financial assistance to nations in economic difficulty, to send immense amounts of food to the starving, and (frequently) to provide security forces to those in need of peacekeepers.
For the most part, these efforts brought no legacy of international good will, no long-term appreciation, no lasting gratitude and no current public approval, even by those who greatly benefited. Indeed, among younger generations in many nations—who had no personal experience with these events, or even among those who did—these actions are largely forgotten, unknown, or seen as just dry history. It is unrealistic to assume, therefore, that such efforts of the past shape the views of people in the present, and especially those of the next generation. For variety of reasons, therefore it seems clear that Rudyard Kipling probably had it right early in the

19th century when he noted that he who steps in to help those who need assistance, who have been left behind, or who require protection, will, as he put it:

> . . . reap his own reward,
> The blame of those ye better,
> The hate of those ye guard.[6]

Thus, given the ephemeral nature of remembrances of the past—and America's contemporary position of predominance in economic and military spheres of power—it is not difficult to understand how people in many countries can always find *something* about the United States and its people to envy, denounce, or even hate.

Resentment and hostility toward Americans can be based on a number of contemporary conditions, issues and events. It may be that people who do not like us see themselves as an exploited market for expensive American goods that they truly want to obtain but can't produce for themselves. Or, they may regard the United States as a source of political ideas, models of behavior or cultural values which they or their leaders do not welcome. These are the familiar charges of *cultural imperialism*. That definition of Americans alone can provide a basis from which to generate ill will.

Beyond that familiar criticism, strong emotions may also be a consequence of a significant *negative incident*—such as the truly regrettable killing of civilians by U.S. forces in Afghanistan in 2002. It appears to have been a fog-of-war mistake in which Air Force personnel flying a combat mission misinterpreted gunfire from the ground (shot into the air to celebrate a wedding) as anti-aircraft fire. They returned fire with tragic consequences. For many in the village, and indeed in the country, it was denounced as a barbaric, brutal and deliberate act. Whatever the factual explanation, some found it a focus for hating Americans.

Or, the negative incident may be a deplorable individual act, such as that of an incredibly stupid and misbehaving American soldier who, in recent times, raped a young and innocent girl in Okinawa—a host country. It may even be the loss by a local team in a sporting event, in which some group from the U.S. participates and wins.

Given the fact that negative incidents are almost certain to occur wherever sizable numbers of Americans intervene with intentions to assist in world affairs, it seems imperative to understand the dynamics by which those conditions and events generate hostility. In a broad sense, therefore, it was to gain a better understanding of those dynamics that the present research was conducted.

A basic assumption upon which the present study rests is this: The collective condemnation expressed by a people when a negative incident occurs does not come out of nowhere. As a general principle, a negative incident can become a *cause celebre,* rallying widespread anger, only if a necessary condition is met. That condition is this:

> *There must already be in place a foundation of shared negative beliefs and attitudes toward the United States upon which the feelings generated by the specific incident can be based.*

It is that assumed necessary condition or principle that in many ways prompted the present research. A major research question based on that principle is this: Does such a foundation of dislike, in fact, exist in at least some countries around the world, waiting for negative incidents to occur that can generate visible outcries, hostile street demonstrations, angry mobs storming embassies, flag-burning, and even more violent and hostile acts against Americans? In addition, are there other factors in the culture of a particular country that can also play a part—along with the foundation of negativism—in predisposing at least some youths to take action against the people of the United States? If so, what are these factors and what are the dimensions of such negative feelings? How are they generated? And perhaps more important, is there any way to change those views if they are already in place?

In many ways, the answers to some of the above questions are already known. There is little need to demonstrate that Americans are not held in high esteem in at least some parts of the globe. Indeed, if anyone had any doubts about that, the tragic events of September 11th, 2001—as well as a significant number of acts of violence toward Americans in many other places

during recent decades—make that abundantly clear. In recent times, opinion polls and surveys of populations in different countries, carefully conducted by various professional research groups, have shown that many adults in the world have negative, and even hostile, attitudes toward the United States, its people and its policies.[7]

The Role of Youth in Acts of Terrorism: A Political Perspective

The contemporary view in official circles in the U.S. is that significant terrorist groups, bent on harming Americans, both at home and abroad, continue to exist and continue to plan further actions. That view appears to be widely accepted by the public. In spite of massive efforts by all levels of government to be vigilant, and to try to prevent any further incursions by terrorists, it seems clear that no American can safely assume that such harm will never come. In a very real sense, then, we remain a nation in harm's way.

Why the present focus on teen-agers? One important rationale for focusing on this particular age category is the fact that *they are the ones who are trained and equipped to conduct terrorists acts.* When examining the nature of such threats, and who it is that carries out actual terrorist activities, either in the U.S. or in other countries, one fact becomes very obvious. They are the young. Many Americans have seen televised scenes of youngsters as young as twelve being trained in terrorists' camps to engage in aggression against the infidel (read Americans). Indeed, in looking around the world, the child carrying an automatic assault rifle or a grenade launcher is an all too familiar sight. The suicide bombers, currently active in Palestine, are almost uniformly youngsters—both boys and girls. Flying airliners into the World Trade Center and Pentagon were not actions of old men. Those who conceived, planned, organized and trained others to carry out those actions were mature individuals. Those who actually flew the airliners on September 11th were young adults, to be sure, but it is clear that their beliefs were shaped earlier, during their teen-age years. In the final analysis, then, it is the young who are recruited to do older men's bidding—to deliver their bombs and weapons to the point of impact, even if it means their own death.

But how is it that the young are so easily recruited and persuaded to make these

sacrifices? How is it that a fifteen-year old girl can be convinced to wrap her young body with explosives and commit the ultimate act of sacrifice to satisfy the political objectives of her older male mentors? Or, in the case of terrorist attacks against Americans, either at home or abroad, how is it that a young person can be persuaded to drive the car-bomb to the exact location, and then kill himself by setting it off. How is it that such youngsters can be so thoroughly convinced that their controllers' cause is just and that Americans deserve to be killed?

One answer to such perplexing questions may be the same principle mentioned. That is, there must already be in place a base of shared negative beliefs and attitudes toward Americans—a foundation on which intense hatreds can be developed. For example, it would probably prove difficult to recruit any large number of youthful suicide bombers, or other youths willing to carry out terrorists attacks, in a country where widespread attitudes toward, and beliefs about, Americans are favorable.

Terrorism Threats and Stresses on Americans: A Public Health Perspective

There have obviously been changes in American life since September 11th, 2001. Many of those changes have brought concerns, anxieties and fears to many citizens that they did not have before that date. National outrage and mourning for those lost in the World Trade Center and the Pentagon has been one source of distress. Another is the constant alerts and warnings in the news about possible terrorist activities. A third is news reports and public discussions about Al Qeda, regrouping of the Taliban, speculation about Osama Bin Ladin, enemies developing weapons of mass destruction and possible military actions that may be needed to preempt their use. All of these do little to alleviate national concerns. Anyone who has traveled on an airliner in recent times has seen visible indicators that danger still exists. It is not only the additional inconvenience of standing in line, showing identification repeatedly, or the body and luggage searches, but the realization of how truly vulnerable a jet aircraft is if terrorists successfully find their way on board.

Viewed in this perspective, continuing sources of anxiety over possible hostile acts of terrorism constitute *a public health problem*. It is not unreasonable to assume that it is one that is

unlikely to go away if the young people in many countries have decidedly negative attitudes and beliefs about Americans. If these views do indeed provide the suggested foundation of beliefs enabling leaders of hostile groups to recruit and train the young for terrorist purposes, then Americans have solid grounds for their concerns. Unfortunately, as the present findings suggest, that may indeed be the case, and the American people are likely to remain in harm's way. Given these conditions, it is unlikely that the country and its people will return to the more relaxed way of life that existed before September 11th, 2001.

Negative Attitudes and the Market-Place: An Economic Perspective

As noted earlier, the economy of the United States has no current equal. If the GDPs of all nations on earth are combined, a third of everything that is produced and brought to market on the globe comes from the United States—even though it has only 4.7 % of the world's population. The American stock and bond market traditionally provides investment opportunities for people in many countries. In addition, the U.S. is by any measure far ahead of any other country in the issuance of patents, and in expenditures of research and development. For that reason it is likely to maintain economic world leadership in the future, in spite of temporary business cycles. Another reason is that the official policies of the U.S. are designed to increase world trade and open markets on the grounds that this is a sound strategy for bolstering the American economy.

What could happen if people in the world decide that they no longer want American investments, goods and services? That may seem unlikely, given the current dominance enjoyed by the United States, but the findings revealed by the present study are troublesome in that they suggest a different state of affairs may be possible in the future. Specifically, that segment of the world's population who are now teen-agers represents the next generation of decision-making adults. Within a decade they will be the ones who are parents and heads of families, the ones who manage businesses, the ones who become influential in government—and above all—who make economic decisions at all levels. If their current dislike of Americans continues into their adult years, there may be more at stake than the prospect of more incidents of terrorism.

A factor that would seem to minimize a decline in the acceptance of American investments, goods and services is that for many people in the world those products seem highly desirable. Dollar-based investments are highly regarded in comparison to those in other currencies. People world-wide eagerly acquire our latest entertainment products, our manufactured goods, and many other things that Americans produce. Yet, as globalization in the production of consumer goods, financial services and other aspects of economies continues—a policy actively supported by the U.S.—there will be increasing competition on all fronts. Exports of products produced in the U.S. would not only be more costly in foreign countries, but also they may be less welcome where populations have negative feelings about Americans.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

As indicated, this study has as its major objective an assessment of the beliefs about and attitudes toward Americans of teen-agers in twelve countries. It is not a study of peoples' orientations toward the government of the United States, the actions of its armed forces, its economic policies, diplomatic positions or any other official condition or issue. Simply put, it is an attempt to understand how the next generation—young people who are now in school—see Americans as people.

Assessing Beliefs and Attitudes Among the Next Generation

The present research is in the tradition of assessing attitudes and opinions of Americans held by the citizens of foreign countries. However, this one is different from previous investigations in one important respect. It focuses *exclusively on young people* in a number of countries within a comparative perspective. It does not attempt to generalize about all age strata in a population, but assesses the views of those that will soon make up the next generation of consumers, voters, family heads, workers and citizens.

Assessing the Influences of Depictions of Americans in Movies and on Television

There are no simple answers to the complex question of the source of negative attitudes and beliefs. The roots of teen-age views of Americans are many. Very obvious are the efforts of

messianic religious fundamentalists who view peoples of the West—and Americans in particular—as religious enemies in the tradition of the crusades of the 12th century. Such fundamentalists systematically train young males (in most cases) to believe that they can achieve special religious status as martyrs by killing Americans. Those who receive such training come to believe that it is their holy mission to wreak vengeance on the *infidels* who seek to destroy their sacred beliefs or otherwise harm their country. Clearly, many of those who play active parts in terrorist events are drawn from the cohorts of young males who receive such schooling.

However, as relevant as that type of training is, it is by no means the only answer as to why active hostility is focused on the United States and its people. As suggested earlier, there must be a broader base of shared beliefs already in place. That is, if it were not for shared discontents and hostilities toward Americans among the young in various nations, there would be no recruits to go to such schools. Basic public opinion principles, well-established for over a century, indicate that radical political activities cannot succeed unless there is a solid base of support for the relevant views.[8] As suggested earlier, it would be difficult to recruit, train and use youths as instruments of terror in a country in which young people in general held positive views about Americans. Negative views and attitudes toward the people and policies of the United States, then, provide a necessary condition, a sub-stratum of support, for motivating young people to commit overt instances of terror.

One possible source of negative beliefs about Americans that is explored in this project is the depictions and portrayals of Americans and their way of life in mass media entertainment products—specifically motion pictures and television programs. Although going to the cinema and viewing television programming at home or among friends is virtually universal in all parts of the world, most of the countries from which the present data were obtained get movies and TV programs produced in the United States. The major reason why that is the case is that few non-western countries have movie industries or television content production facilities. For example, there is little in the way of a significant movie industry, or one devoted to producing TV entertainment, in Saudi Arabia, Nigeria or Pakistan—each of which is a nation included in

this study. In such countries, going to the cinema is common, and either the government or a private group provides television broadcasts or cable facilities. Something of interest must be presented in these outlets. If they are not available locally, they have to be imported. Therefore, entertainment products in the form of TV programs and movies are obtained from Western sources and distributed to the local population. An effort was made, therefore, to determine the degree to which television sets and VCRs were in use in homes and elsewhere. At least some of the findings from this aspect of the project are included in the present preliminary report. More specific data are included on the influence of movies on attitudes toward Americans from one of the Likert subscales.

A Summary of the Objectives

In overview, the goals of the investigation can be stated simply. They are to gather data provided on an attitude scale (questionnaire) responded to by teen-agers in twelve countries around the world. The respondents are high school students, who are from neither the poorest nor the most affluent families in their countries. The results from an analysis of these data can be helpful in trying to:

(1) Understand the ways in which the next generation in the countries studied regards Americans. That is, an important goal is to measure attitudes and beliefs about Americans held by various categories of teen-agers who will soon become politically and economically active adults.

(2) Understand the many sources from which such views are formed—with a particular emphasis on the part played by depictions of American families and people, their behavior and ways of life in motion pictures, television entertainment and news programs.

(3) Sort out from what is found any possible strategies that might be used for the difficult task of reshaping those views.

THE METHODS USED

It must be stated clearly from the outset that this project does not provide final answers to any of these issues. As has already been indicated, the project has clear limitations. Mainly, its

procedures for sampling do not meet the most rigorous criteria set forth by statisticians. Even so, the voices of 1,259 teen-agers who were studied provide a wealth of information about their how they feel about Americans, and those views are probably reasonably representative of the young people who live in the twelve countries studied. There were no obvious sources of systematic bias in their selection. As noted, the respondents are from neither the rich nor the poor households in their countries, but are from families in the middle and lower middle classes. Nevertheless, the results obtained may differ from those if more sophisticated procedures based on equal probability sampling from the teen-age populations had been possible.

What Was Measured and How?

As has been explained, the attitudes and beliefs of the youths in the twelve countries were assessed with a questionnaire to which they responded. The questionnaire included not only a basic attitude scale, but also a number of additional items concerning their personal and family characteristics (findings concerning those characteristics will not be presented in this report but will be a part of a later one). In addition, three sets of statements (items) in the basic attitude scale provide a way of assessing additional clusters of beliefs among the respondents. These are termed *subscales*, and will be discussed in detail below.

The attitude scale and related questionnaire used to assess teen-age beliefs and attitudes toward Americans was carefully constructed following standard psychometric procedures.[9] The principles used in developing the scale are straightforward. They can be summarized in these terms: An attitude can be defined as *a set of evaluative beliefs about some "object" that are held by a person*. That object can be anything from a political policy or electoral candidate to a racial or ethnic category of people. A statement of evaluative belief is one that provides some description of the attitude object that implies favorability or unfavorability, acceptance or ejection, a positive or negative evaluation. Such statements can be distinguished from those that simply state facts. To illustrate, the following is a statement of fact: "Boston is a large city." A person who agrees or disagrees is not making a personal evaluation. In contrast, the following is a statement of evaluation: "Boston is a beautiful city." A person agreeing or disagreeing with this

statement is expressing a positive or negative orientation toward Boston as an attitude object. The twelve statements included in the attitude scale incorporates those principles. The English version is shown on the page that follows. This scale was translated into the various languages used by the youthful respondents in their various countries. The scale (shown on the next page) consists of twelve (Likert-type) attitude statements for the subject to consider. As explained, each of these twelve items consists of an evaluative statement of belief about Americans (as people, and not the government, its policies or actions).

Each subject was asked to respond to each statement by selecting from among the following five response categories (shown on the scale) the one that best represented his or her evaluative belief about the statement:

"*I strongly disagree*," "*I disagree*," "*I am undecided*," "*I agree*" or "*I strongly agree*."

In the standard Likert procedure, each of these categories is assigned a value or score, ranging from 1 (for a most negative response), through 3 (for a neutral response) to 5 (for a most positive response). By averaging these numbers for the categories selected by the subject over all 12 items, an *attitude score* is obtained for each respondent. This is standard psychometric procedure.

These twelve statements were not picked at random. Each was developed after extensive discussions with individuals from each of the countries represented in the project. This was done to make certain that they would be understood by the subjects who would be responding. A minor rewording of one statement was required in the translation in one country in order to meet language norms. Specifically, in Pakistan the phrase "sexually immoral" was deemed to be unacceptable for use among young students whose language is Urdu. Therefore, the wording was changed in the translation of item 3 to read, "have no shame"—which is a common expression in Urdu that implies the same meaning.

Half the statements in the scale were positive and half negative. For example, Item 8 states that "Americans are a peaceful people." In contrast, Item 9 states that, "Many Americans engage in criminal activities." Obviously, if a person agreed or strongly agreed with Item 8

CONFIDENTIAL QUESTIONNAIRE
Concerning Your Opinions About Americans

Read each of the statements below. Note the phrases above the lines of small spaces [ ]for each of the statements. After reading the statement, decide how you feel about what it says concerning **most Americans** (that is, citizens of the United States)**.**

If you "strongly agree" with the statement, then put an X in the small space [ ]under that phrase. If you "strongly disagree," place the X in the space under that phrase. If your feelings are somewhere in between, or you are undecided, write the X in the space that best expresses how you feel.

	I strongly disagree	I disagree	I am undecided	I agree	I strongly agree
1. Americans are generally quite violent.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
2. Americans are a generous people.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
3. Many American women are sexually immoral.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
4. Americans have respect for people unlike themselves.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ].
5. Americans are very materialistic.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
6. Americans have strong religious values.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
7. Americans like to dominate other people.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
8. Americans are a peaceful people.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
9. Many Americans engage in criminal activities.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
I0. Americans are very concerned about their poor.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
11. Americans have strong family values.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
12. There is very little for which I admire Americans.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

(Americans are peaceful), it would indicate a favorable view. Agreement or strong agreement

with Item 9 (Americans are violent), on the other hand, would indicate a negative attitude. Again, all of this is standard psychometric procedure for constructing and using a Likert-type attitude scale.

To make the results more intuitively obvious (reader friendly), all of the numbers in all the items and the overall scales were mathematically transformed to a simple continuum ranging from: -5 (very negative) through 0 (neutral) to +5 (very positive). It is these transformed numbers that appear on the various charts in the sections presenting the results. Again, the goal was to make the results easy to understand for persons not accustomed to the use of attitude scales.

The Likert scale procedure also provides three *subscales.* (These are shown on the next page.) These sub-scales are based on specific items within the list of twelve. This is an important feature of the Likert procedure, permitting assessments in addition to the overall attitude. For example, Subscale One is intended to measure the influence of depictions of Americans in *movies and television programming* on each subject's beliefs. Subscale Two represents an attempt to assess the respondent's views about Americans being *cultural imperialists.* The third, Subscale Three, was designed to ascertain the degree to which the individual believes that Americans have *humanitarian values*. Again, the use of such subscales is standard psychometric procedure for the measurement of beliefs and attitudes.

In the remainder of the questionnaire completed by the 1,259 respondents, there were additional basic items designed to record gender, age and information concerning media use by the subjects, plus their (and their family's) travel to the United States.

The use of the Likert scale as a psychometric procedure is a positive feature of the present project. It provides for an overall measure of attitudes plus the subscales discussed above in a way that permits a relatively detailed analysis of the dimensions of the views and beliefs of the respondents. Alternative approaches to opinion and attitude measurement, many of which are

THE THREE SUBSCALES

Subscale One: Media Depictions of Americans

Scale Item	I strongly agree	I agree	I am undecided	I disagree	I strongly disagree
Americans are generally quite violent.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Many American women are sexually immoral.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Americans are very materialistic.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Many Americans engage in criminal activities.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

Subscale Two: Americans as Cultural Imperialists

Americans like to dominate other people.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Americans have respect for people unlike themselves	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Americans are a peaceful people.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

Subscale Three: Americans Have Humanitarian Values

Americans are a generous people.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Americans have strong religious values.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Americans are very concerned about their poor	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Americans have strong family values.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

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dependent on simple “yes” or “no” answers to specific questions do not provide this.

In addition to the use of a standard psychometric procedure for measuring attitudes, other positive features of the study are these: There is every reason to believe that the young people who filled out the attitude scale and responded to the other items in the questionnaire found the experience a positive one—and that they recorded their answers responsibly. Many wrote in remarks to indicate that liked the experience of having their views sought. Many others added comments that explained or expanded on what they had recorded on the scales. Moreover, there was very little evidence that any of the subjects were trying to play games or fool the researchers (as is sometimes the case in such research).

Who Was Studied and How Were They Selected?

As noted, the respondents in this project were all teen-agers in the various kinds and counterparts of high schools in the twelve countries. In each case, these were teen-agers from the middle and lower middle strata of their communities. Those from the most affluent and from the poorest segments of the societies were not included. (The rich send their children to expensive private schools; and poor children do not go at all.)

High school youngsters are a difficult category of residents in any country to study. To gain access to these respondents, this research surmounted obstacles that would probably never have been overcome by those seeking to go through *official channels* to obtain permission to conduct a survey among such youngsters. In almost all cases, researchers who want to study young people in any country have to do so by reaching them through their schools. Trying to do so by calling on individual families at home is not a practical strategy. There is no assurance that parental permission would be given for their childrens' participation. Even in the United States, access to high school students obtained by gaining the approval of educational administrators is very difficult. School administrators—quite rightly—are very cautious about what kind of research questionnaires they will allow to be placed in front of the students over whom they have jurisdiction. Often specific written parental permission is required.

In the setting of another country, trying to obtain prior permission to conduct such a study by going through official diplomatic or governmental channels—especially in nations that

are not particularly friendly to the United States—would probably have been an exercise in total futility. The present authors used another means to gain access to their youthful subjects—an "under the radar screen" means that bypassed officialdom in each of the countries studied. The details will be explained below.

A SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

The principal findings on the attitudes of these 1,259 teen-agers are presented in three major sections that follow. The median age of the respondents was 17 years—with half above that age and half below. They were evenly divided between males and females. Other personal and family data were gathered, but the data presented in the sections that follow are descriptive. Detailed comparisons of different categories of respondents, based on inferential statistical analyses are not included in this preliminary report.

The first section on findings presents two sets of results: One set is the results from *all countries combined.* This is followed in this first section by the more detailed results on each of the attitude scale items *from each country separately*. The second major section on results presents the findings in a different way—*item-by-item from the attitude scale*, with the results from each country listed in rank order. Finally, the third section on findings is devoted to the results from the *three subscales.* Immediately following, then, is a summary of the results from the first of these three analyses.

An Overview Based on Combined Data from All Twelve Countries

Figure 1 shows the average or *overall attitude score* for the respondents in each of the countries. The value of this chart is that it provides for a comparison of the overall views of Americans among the twelve countries studied. As can be seen, in most of the countries, the respondents had at least some degree of negative attitudes toward American people. These range from clearly negative averages in Saudi-Arabia and Bahrain, through more neutral views in Nigeria and Italy. The only respondents who had somewhat positive attitudes were the young people studied in Argentina.

It should come as no surprise that teen-agers in Saudi-Arabia and Bahrain—two Muslim countries—have quite negative views of Americans. The influence of religion is usually cited to account for such negative feelings. However, it is likely that the negative image of Americans also reflects what psychologists refer to as a "halo effect."

A halo effect is a carry-over influence from the beliefs and attitudes of the widely held-views of adults in those countries—concerning the U.S. government, its official policies and actions. A recent Gallup poll of the opinions held by adults in nine Muslim countries, concerning the official actions and policies of the United States government, showed very negative attitudes.[10] It seems most likely that those adults have a significant influence on the next generation, passing on their views, not only about the official policies and actions of the United States, but also—in a halo effect—about Americans as people as well.

What is surprising about Figure 1 is what was found in South Korea and Mexico. The young respondents in both countries held attitudes toward Americans almost as negative as those in Saudi-Arabia and Bahrain. If what was found in these two countries is at all representative, it is hard to explain why young people in South Korea and Mexico judge Americans so harshly.

These harsh judgments cannot be a function of religion. Neither Mexico nor South Korea has any significant Muslim population. The case of South Korea presents a clear example of the Rudyard Kipling's principle. It was the United States that kept their country out of the communist sphere—with many American young people killed in the process. To understand what would have happened to their families and lives if that effort had not been made, these young South Koreans need only to look northward. Again, it seems, Kipling had it right. Helping, or even protecting, people appears to earn enmity and not gratitude—at least among many. Furthermore, events of the past are ephemeral and just dry history for subsequent generations and have little carry-over to current attitudes, beliefs and opinions.

If the views of teen-agers studied in South Korea seem difficult to explain, those of Mexico are even more so. Clearly, Americans are not held in high regard by the young people studied. They were more negative than those assessed in the People' Republic of China—with

which we have had long had significant differences. Mexico was also more negative than the Muslim country of Pakistan.

Somewhat the same comment can be made about Taiwan. The teen-agers studied in Beijing were more favorable toward Americans than those in Taipei. The American government is spending vast sums to protect that island population from the demands of The People's Republic of China. If it were not for that protection, the people of Taiwan would be leading the more regimented life-style of a communist society.

Teen-agers from Nigeria and Italy were not negative—merely neutral. Several factors could be playing a part in the case of Italy. It certainly has few Muslims. Many American families came originally from Italy, and the United States played a key role liberating that country from fascism decades ago in World War II. Perhaps some of those factors remain as a foundation for current beliefs and attitudes.

It is not easy to explain the neutral findings from Nigeria. The United States has not been particularly involved with that country on any sustained basis. Nigeria has been neither a source of extensive immigration to the U.S., or particularly a recipient of its assistance. With so little involvement, it appears that Kipling's principle does not apply.

Argentina was the only country of the twelve in which teen-agers generally gave Americans positive marks. This finding is truly difficult to understand. The United States has not played a particularly positive role in Argentine affairs. Indeed the U.S. sided with the British when Argentina attempted to claim the Falkland Islands. However, that does not seem to have provided a basis for teen-age negative views of Americans. It may be that the limited U.S. involvement in the affairs of Argentine is the foundation of the respondents' positive attitudes—compared to, say, Mexico, with which we are closely involved.

In summary, the overall scores from the twelve countries showed a range of feelings from clearly negative to somewhat positive. The reasons for teen-agers' negative views of Americans in some of the countries are not difficult to understand. The religious factor undoubtedly plays a part. The influence of parents and other adults on the next generation also seems likely in some

cases. Yet, in countries like South Korea, Mexico and Taiwan the finding that young people hold negative beliefs about Americans is less easy to explain.

Profiles of Specific Beliefs about Americans Obtained in Each Country

Figure 1 provided an overview that combines the responses for each country into a single index (overall attitude score). However, Figures 2 through 13 provide much greater detail.

These twelve charts show how each of the evaluative statements in the attitude scale was responded to by the subjects in each country. Thus, they provide a detailed profile of the evaluative statements about Americans as judged by the teen-agers studied in each of the countries.

A feature of these charts that stands out is their many differences. Some are obviously more negative on some statements than others, but in some, the respondents gave positive responses. Thus, no two are alike. This is an important finding in that no assumption can be made that overall assessments of attitudes (such as those shown earlier in Figure 1) can adequately describe the more subtle dimensions of positive or negative views of those who respond to the scale in a particular country. In other words, respondents are not just positive or negative toward an attitude object in some overall sense. They have complex views—some of which are positive and some negative—about whatever is under study. In this case, the subjects were not uniformly negative, but had a profile of evaluative beliefs that differed from one country to the next.

Responses by Country to Each Attitude Scale Item

The results obtained from each of the twelve attitude scale items, *considered one-by-one*, are shown in Figures 14 through 25.

These twelve charts show the degree to which the respondents in each of the countries expressed positive or negative feelings about the particular statement shown at the top. On each chart, the countries are listed on the left *in rank order*—with the most negative country (for that statement) at the top and the most positive at the bottom.

As can be seen by examining these charts individually, there are numerous differences in

the patterns of response to these statements of beliefs about Americans. As might be expected, Saudi-Arabia and Bahrain led in negative responses, reflecting their overall positions as discussed in the previous section on Figure 1. What was not evident in that chart was the *pattern* of positive and negative responses to the various statements indicating beliefs about Americans. As might be anticipated, the subjects in the more favorable countries overall—namely Argentina and Nigeria, gave positive responses to many of the items. However, as was noted in the discussion of patterns in Figures 2 through 13, countries that were negative in an overall sense—namely Pakistan, China and Taiwan—also gave positive responses to at least some of the individual statements.

Absent from this positive category is Mexico. Even though the respondents from Mexico were not the most negative toward Americans in an overall sense (Figure 1), there was no statement of belief to which they gave a positive response. Even Pakistan and China gave positive responses to at least two of the attitude items.

Again, what is important about Figures 14 through 25 is the very different patterns of responses that were found in the twelve countries concerning each specific statement of evaluative belief. What this implies, once more, is that measuring how people feel about Americans is by no means *unidimensional.* Respondents, such as those studied in the present project, are not *uniformly* positive or negative on every dimension of their attitudes. One size does not fit all. This finding is consistent with the basic definition of attitude stated earlier—as a set of evaluative beliefs toward an object. Some beliefs are more, and some less, negative. Others can be more or less positive. This can be important information for designing a strategy to change the attitudes of a set of respondents toward the attitude object.

Results Obtained from the Three Sub-Scales

As explained, the attitude scale administered to the respondents included items that can be combined to produce subscales. One was designed to show the influences of images of Americans *derived from movies and television programming*. A second was developed to assess

views of Americans as *cultural imperialists*. The third was an attempt to measure respondents' beliefs about Americans as *having humanitarian values.* (The specific items making up the three subscales are shown on page 17.)

The basis for developing *Subscale One* was that Americans are frequently depicted in motion pictures and entertainment-type television programs in ways that do not reflect the realities of their lives. In many ways the same can be said about the news. Journalists concentrate on such issues as crime, conflict, violence, corruption and the bizzare—which are the basis by which they judge the "news value" of a story. Needless to say, what is portrayed in such stories hardly reflects the experiences of everyday Americans in their routine lives.

There is every reason to believe, then, that such depictions in entertainment products and news provide flawed interpretations of Americans as people. This distorted view of Americans is a result of the fact that those who produce such items of popular culture do not have a goal of providing realistic and accurate portrayals in their entertainment products. Entertainment and news producers and distributors are corporations whose major concern is the size of the audience and the profit that can be made from their films and other products. One need not object to that. In a capitalistic economy, earning profits is an approved goal. For that reason—and because people who object to what they depict have little voice—there is a constant flow of movies and television programs and news to almost every country showing unrealistic depictions of Americans and their way of life. That distribution includes outlets in Muslim nations that are very conservative. Having limited, or even no, production facilities of their own, such countries have few options to making use of imported materials. Western movies, TV entertainment and news programs are viewed by interested and enthusiastic audiences—particularly the young in the case of popular culture. In some countries such entertainment products are officially prohibited, but even there active black markets provide viewers with what they want.[11]

Items 1, 3, 5 and 9 from the Likert scale, therefore, present statements that reflect what young people in the countries studied may come to believe about Americans if their views were

shaped by to some degree by mass media depictions. As noted, movies and television entertainment programming and news often depicts American life in terms of violence, sexual looseness, an emphasis on materialism and criminal activities.

Figure 26 shows in graphic form what was found for Subscale One. While no definitive conclusions can be drawn from these data, there is a strong suggestion that the respondents in most of the countries included in the project held evaluative beliefs that are somewhat consistent with the ways in which Americans are often depicted in the entertainment media. In particular, American women are seen as sexually immoral—probably reflecting the frequent depictions of sexual intercourse between unmarried couples so often shown in movies. There seems little doubt also that at least some of the respondents (lacking other sources of information) have come to believe that many Americans are generally quite violent—a reflection of gunfights and physical assaults often depicted in both entertainment products and news reports. They also appear to believe that Americans are materialistic, reflecting the abundance of automobiles, elegant surroundings and other materialistic clues common in media depictions. Finally, many can conclude that Americans often engage in criminal activities—which are so frequently a part of the plots of action movies, TV drama and news reports.

Subscale Two represents an attempt to assess beliefs that Americans are *cultural imperialists.* The concept of cultural imperialism is a complex one. In its most basic meaning, the term "imperialism" implies *hegemony*—that is some form of domination by a powerful country over those that are weaker. Going back to Roman times, it was a term used to describe military and political hegemony. In recent times, it has been applied to a somewhat different form of (assumed) domination. One group of contemporary critics of the U.S. apply it to the displacement of indigenous cultures by American products, values and ways of life. As they see it, this is unwarranted and an unethical exercise of power. For such critics, the fact that American styles, entertainment products and practices are adopted in many countries offers sufficient proof that a government-industry conspiracy exists, aimed at subjugating weaker nations for political gain and economic control of markets. More conservative observers respond to these claims by

pointing out that no one "forces" anyone to adopt American entertainment products, goods, values, ideas, styles or anything else, in the receiving countries. The people there make their own decisions whether or not to adopt them, and they often do so enthusiastically. An alternative explanation of the flow of items between counties, then, is one of *cultural diffusion*—the voluntary transmission of items of culture from one society to another—which anthropologists have noted even among societies that existed during the Stone Age.

The present authors decline to enter into this debate, but *Subscale Two* makes use of three statements (4, 7 and 8 on the Likert scale) that were designed to provide a measure of the degree to which respondents *believe* that Americans are cultural imperialists. Figure 27 appears to indicate that this view is rather widely held among the youths studied. In nine of the twelve countries, the respondents subscribed—to one degree or another—to the view that Americans do not have respect for people unlike themselves, that they like to dominate other people, and that they are not peaceful. These are all characteristics of a people determined to exercise hegemony over others. Again, only the teen-age respondents in Italy and Argentina rejected this view.

Subscale Three attempts to assess respondents' beliefs about Americans' *humanitarian values.* Somewhat less negative results were obtained with this scale. Even on this issue, however, the subjects in about half of the countries entertained negative views. As Figure 28 shows, youths in China, Taiwan, and Spain were more or less neutral. Only those in the Dominican Republic and Nigeria were on the positive side. Clearly rejecting the belief that Americans have humanitarian values—that is that they are generous, have strong religious values, are concerned about their poor and have strong family values—were the teen-agers in Bahrain, Saudi-Arabia, South Korea and Mexico. Again, the results from the Muslim countries were less surprising. Those from South Korea and Mexico are more difficult to interpret.

From the overall summary of the results presented in Figures 1 through 28, it seems clear that the teen-age respondents in nearly all of the countries studied held negative attitudes toward Americans. Only those in Argentina were generally positive. The profiles of evaluative beliefs about Americans described by the twelve statements in the scale varied considerably from

country-to-country—indicating that the dimensions and bases for negative attitudes were by no means the same in each. Negative mass media depictions of Americans in movies and TV programs appeared to have influenced the beliefs of many of the subjects—along with other factors. Americans were seen as cultural imperialists by the majority. Finally, respondents in only about half of the countries believed Americans to have humanitarian values.

INTERPRETING THE RESULTS

The results of this project offer information relevant to the three perspectives suggested in the BACKGROUND section of this report. One is a political perspective focusing on possible future acts of terrorism committed by young people who see the United States and its people as their enemy. A second is a public health perspective, suggesting that if the country's concern with terrorism continues into the next generation there will be an extension of stresses and anxieties for the American population. Finally, the third is an economic perspective. If those of the next generation hold negative views of Americans and their country, that fact could lead to a reduction in their willingness to import products and services from the United States.

It is not possible to make forecasts about the probability of acts of terrorism based on the information derived from this project. Mark Twain said it well when he noted that "forecasting can be difficult, especially when it concerns the future." What is implied by the results of this project, however, is that the next generations in most of the countries studied have many negative beliefs about Americans as people. If that is indeed the case, those attitudes have every prospect of generating serious consequences, at least in some places under some conditions.

But what are those conditions? Tentatively, the following analysis may offer insights: To begin with, it is almost inevitable that in countries where there is an American presence—particularly a military one—there will be blunders and *negative incidents* that will be used by terrorist organizations or others with grudges against Americans to arouse condemnation of the people of the United States. However, it was also suggested that such incidents in themselves are

a necessary but not a sufficient condition. Public anger may be aroused by such incidents but they do not inevitably lead to youthful terrorism.

Given recent history, it appears that other conditions must be present. Obviously, a religious factor is also *a necessary condition*. That seems to be supported by the fact that the terrorists that most concern the United States today are Muslims. But caution must be exercised in stating this as a necessary condition. It is well understood that the overwhelming majority of members of that faith as a whole pose no threats whatever to anyone. At the same time, it is clear that some among them do. It may seem unfair to point the finger at Muslims, but this religious factor among a small minority has played an important part in recent acts of terrorism. In contrast, few terrorists have come from either South Korea or Mexico—where Muslims have little presence. Negative feelings about Americans are relatively strong in those counties, and negative incidents of one sort or another have occurred in both in past years. But in spite of those two conditions, few or no young terrorists are known to have been recruited from either country. In terms of logical analysis, then, a religious factor does seem like one of the necessary conditions of today's terrorism by militant groups.

It can be suggested that a third necessary condition must be in place before a negative incident can arouse young people to engage in hostile acts. That is, the following principle (noted earlier):

> *There must already be in place a foundation of shared negative beliefs and attitudes toward the people of the United States upon which the feelings generated by the specific incident can be based.*

In other words, the condition of commonly shared *negative evaluations of Americans*—as illustrated by the findings from the present project—appear to provide a third necessary (but not sufficient) condition that can increases the likelihood of harm to the people of the United States.

If all three of the above necessary conditions are present, and if one final one is also in

place—the presence of *messianic militant groups* whose leaders are bent on creating harm for Americans—it can be suggested that acts of terrorism will be likely. Thus, if all four necessary conditions are present—negative incidents, the religious factor, a foundation of negative beliefs and attitudes and the presence of militant groups—the probability of at least some young people being recruited to engage in terrorist acts is high. Those four conditions do appear to be present in countries such as Saudi-Arabia and Bahrain. In contrast, in Argentina none of the four appear to be present and the probability that young people from that country will be recruited there by messianic militant groups to engage in hostile acts against Americans seems extremely low.

In general, then, if the results of the present project can be considered at all representative and valid, there appears to be a significant probability that the threat of terrorist acts against Americans will continue in the years ahead. In those countries where the four necessary conditions come together to form *a complex sufficient condition*, it seems likely that at least some from the next generation may be recruited and trained to engage in terrorism against what they will define as their enemy. If that is indeed the case, all three of the perspectives discussed earlier provide a basis for anticipating what may happen in a larger sense. The United States will remain embroiled for many years in a political struggle to contain terrorism, both at home and abroad. This will continue for the foreseeable future to be a public health problem for Americans, who will have to endure the stress and anxieties associated with a constant flow of threats. And finally, it could mean unwanted economic future consequences if markets in some parts of the world are no longer available to the export of American goods and services and if confidence in the U.S. economy erodes the flow of investment funds into stocks and bonds.

An important questions is this: *What are the sources of teen-age attitudes and beliefs about Americans?* It is an important question that has an obvious bearing on the future in terms of the political, public health and economic perspectives discussed earlier. In addition, it is a question that must be understood by those who may wish to develop a strategy for changing those views. The problem that they will face is that there are no obvious answers that can provide some simple way to change the beliefs and attitudes of young people who will soon take

over from the current generation. The reason is that every human being derives his or her conceptions of reality from many sources—few of which can be influenced from the outside.

Teen-agers in the countries studied in this project are little different from those elsewhere in the world. They form their opinions, ideas, beliefs, likes and dislikes, negative and positive attitudes, and so on, from their lifetime of experience with whatever they encounter in their environment. That includes what they learn from their parents, from school, from their peers, the mass media, their community and from the cultures and subcultures in which they participate. If the majority of these sources define Americans in negative terms there is little that some outside source or agency can do to intervene to (as the trite phrase goes) "capture their hearts and minds."

Nevertheless, the *sources* of ideas of young people is an important issue. In the section that follows, one of those sources—mass communications in their many forms—is discussed as it may play a part in shaping the ideas of all of us, including young people in many counties. The discussion focuses on three related *theories of the process and effects of mass communication* that attempt to describe and explain how it is that the content of the mass media that are so ubiquitous in all parts of the globe can shape peoples' ideas about what they present.

How Beliefs are Formed: The Social Construction of Reality

The process of learning about the physical and social realities of the world in which one lives is a social one, resulting from participating in *communication with others*. This idea was originally addressed by Plato, many centuries ago. In more modern times, psychologists and other social scientists have added a considerable body of insights and knowledge to his original ideas. Yet, in many ways, Plato's explanation of the sources of our inner knowledge—our beliefs and conceptions of the world outside our heads—is still quite valid. In his *Republic* he set forth his well-known "Allegory of the Cave," in which he described a sort of psychological experiment. His passages still help us understand the ways in which we grasp our physical and social environment to build our beliefs about the nature of reality.

Plato asks us to visualize a small number of men who have participated in a curious kind

of situation: “Imagine the condition of men,” he asks us, “who had always lived deep within a sort of cavernous chamber underground, with an entrance open only to the light and a long passage all down the cave.”[12]

Plato goes on further, asking us to imagine that these men had since childhood been chained on a bench next to a wall in such a way that they could see only straight ahead.

Additionally, Plato explained that behind the men chained to the bench in this imaginary situation is a high wall running down the middle of the cave. On the side opposite the men is a kind of walkway built along the wall a few feet below the top. This walkway provides a sort of narrow track along which people can move carrying various objects. The men on the bench below cannot see the people or the track because they are on the other side facing the other way. Still further behind the wall, on the side opposite the men, Plato wants us to imagine that there is a very bright fire whose light will be reflected on the opposite side of the cave, where the men can see it.

Now imagine people walking along the track, holding up figures and shapes of various kinds—like silhouettes of objects, animals and men. They are holding them up on poles just above the top of the wall. Remember that there is a fire burning very brightly, and it's light can be seen glowing strongly by the chained men against their opposite wall of the cave. These conditions will cause *shadows of the objects* held up by the people to be cast on the wall as the people move along. The seated men can see them clearly. Under these conditions, the men in chains will observe what was called in the Middle Ages a *phantasmagoria*—a moving-shadow show. They will not see the people holding up the silhouettes because they are below the top of the wall—and in any case they are on the other side.

Plato added sound to the show. Suppose, he said, that the people carrying the objects talk freely. These sounds come to the chained men as echoes off the wall that they see, and they can hear them clearly. To the men it will appear that the shadows are making the sounds. The chained men can also talk freely among themselves to exchange ideas and try to understand what they are seeing and hearing.

What are the implications of this ancient imaginary experiment? Plato maintained that the chained men would try to *interpret* the shadows—to construct knowledge about them—that is, *meanings* for the only realities that they are able to experience under their circumstances. He maintained that such prisoners would believe that the shadows *were reality*, that they would develop among themselves shared rules for understanding these realities There is little doubt, Plato maintained, that they would invent *names* for the different kinds of shadows and evaluate some more positively than others. (These are, after all, the actions we all perform today in understanding our realities.)

In the cave, Plato suggested, the seated men would congratulate the one with the keenest eye for identifying the passing shapes and the one who had the best memory for the order in which they passed. In fact, said Plato, they might give prizes for the one who could best predict what shadows would appear next. To those of us not in such a cave, it is clear that the knowledge that men would develop in these circumstances—even though based solidly on their personal observations—would be a *very false view of actual reality.*

The point of this description of Plato's insights for us is that people today also come to develop social constructions of reality from the circumstances and processes of communication in which they participate. Hopefully, none are confined as were Plato's men, but in many ways *we are all in a kind of cave in a certain sense*. A teen-ager living in one of the countries studied in the present project can participate only in the processes of communication which are available to him or her. It is from these sources—and only those sources—that he or she can construct personal understandings, beliefs and evaluations of events, people, and everything else encountered in his or her social and physical environment. In a way, then, it is a sort of cave. It is not one with chains, but it certainly has definite boundaries that confine the person and limit his or her contact with sources of information that are beyond what is immediately available.

In a very general sense, then, a *theory of the social construction of reality*—derived almost directly from Plato's Allegory—provides a beginning point for understanding where teen-agers get their ideas about Americans. The data collected from the 1,259 youths who

responded to the questionnaire showed that very few indeed had traveled to the United States (escaping from their cave). Only 11.7 percent of the respondents had actually visited the U.S.[13]

The basic ideas of the theory of the social construction of reality can be set forth in modern form in a set of related propositions. (See next page.) Such theories provide both *descriptions* of the process involved and tentative *explanations* of how it takes place.[14]

This is a complex theory, but as noted it is based directly on ideas developed by Plato more than two millennia ago. It is stated here as a broad and general explanation of how people—including the teen-agers studied in this project—construct ideas about their world from whatever process of communication is available to them.

The most important feature in the above theory for present purposes is Proposition 5. It notes the role of *mass media* as a source of meanings for aspects of reality with which one has little or no direct personal contact or experience. Today, and in the lives of most of the young people studied in this project, *the mass media are the counterparts of Plato's shadows on the wall.* They include news reports, movies, television dramas, magazines, video games, Internet content, popular music and anything else that brings depictions of Americans and their ways of life.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY THEORY: A FORMAL SUMMARY

1. All human beings require *understandings* of the world in which they live, and to which they must adapt in order to survive on a daily basis.

2. To provide food, shelter and protection, and to perpetuate the species, human beings have always been *communicating* creatures--at first using only nonverbal signs and signals, to coordinate activities in families and in small communities.

3. *Language* became a part of human existence when evolutionary changes to the body made possible the control of sound with the vocal chords and the storing of complex meanings in a larger brain.

4. With words available, features of the environment with which people had to deal could be given names, with associated conventions of internally aroused meanings, permitting *standardization of*

interpretations of phenomena, stabilizing the meanings attached to all the aspects of reality with which people had to deal.

5. In modern times, *media*, including *mass media*, play a part in developing the meanings individuals develop for events, situations and objects in the human environment through their depictions and representations in entertainment and other content.

6. **Therefore**: The meanings—either personal and private or culturally shared—of any aspect of reality to which people must adjust, are developed in a process of communication, which indicates that reality, in the sense of individual interpretations or a consensus of shared meanings people attach to objects, actions, events and situations is *socially constructed*.

But what do these shadows reveal about people who live in the United States? It is not hard to answer that question. Over many decades there has been an almost relentless trend in the content of mass communication messages to emphasize increasingly such themes as *crime, violence, gore, sensationalism, explicit sexual behavior and vulgar language*. There has been a kind of cycle, in which the standards of conservatives in the American society have halted, or even reversed, the trend from time-to-time. But for a number of reasons, the limits that they have sought to impose have always been swept aside. To describe and explain this process, by which media content has changed (some would say deteriorated) a second theory offers insights as to how Americans are currently depicted in mass media content, and why under some circumstances those portrayals can arouse negative evaluations among people who are exposed to them.

Flawed Depictions of Americans: The Creeping Cycle of Desensitization

The creeping cycle theory seeks to explain the following: Why, over a century and a half, has mass media content produced in the U.S. continued to evolve toward what appears to many to be increasing triviality, decreasing levels of taste and, above all, ever-lowering moral standards? It is a question that has considerable importance for understanding the social construction of reality where young people in other countries are heavily dependent on the content of mass media to understand the characteristics of Americans.

The trend described below has long been deplored by a lengthy list of respected critics—by preachers from the pulpit, professors at the podium and politicians on the political platform. It has also been castigated by a host of citizen's groups concerned about rising crime and displays of gore, looser sexual norms, more widespread use of dirty language, the erosion of family values—all of which are assumed by critics to harm children. Those critics have spoken out against what they see as a "vast wasteland" of sensational newspaper stories, offensive popular music, mindless content of broadcasts, trite movie plots, the use of vulgar words, and (more recently) disgusting sites on the Internet. They are deeply saddened by the use of the technological marvels of modern communication for what they believe to be shallow, meaningless and even harmful purposes. Yet, in spite of these protests—often bitter at times—the print, film, recording, broadcast and computer media, it is said, slowly but constantly push the cutting edge of transgression regarding this type of content on and on.

Few would claim that such a change has not taken place. But why is this happening and what are the consequences? Are the mass media being controlled by managers who see their mission as lowering the moral standards and cultural tastes of their audiences? Is this a deliberate plot to alter and degrade the sensitivities of decent people—to get them routinely to accept mindless drama, violence as an approved way of settling disagreements and to have them regard sexual encounters as having little more meaning than having lunch together? Is this an attempt to bring people to use an expanded vocabulary of disgusting four-letter words to color their everyday speech? Are they determined to depict Americans in ways that are despised in other counties?

Or, is there something else at work here? Are there impersonal factors and forces in the American society, and in others similarly organized, that have produced the present situation *without any unethical intent* on the part of those who control the media to lower tastes and moral standards? That, precisely, is the explanation that is offered by the theory of *the creeping cycle of desensitization*.

The theory places the changes in the norms concerning triviality, violence, sex and vulgar

language, into a context of economic, political and cultural factors. Functioning together, the theory explains, these factors have made it *inevitable* that, over the last one hundred and twenty years or so, those who have managed and controlled the media have had to make these changes in content in order to earn profit and survive financially. If they failed to do so they would have had to go into bankruptcy and close down their newspapers, movie studios, television networks and web sites.

What drives media producers to offer their wares to the public in the way they do is *the profit line*. That has not changed over the years. In 1966, DeFleur put it in terms of the relationship between audience tastes, audience size and the requirements for making profits in order to survive financially:

> "The type of entertainment content that seems most capable of eliciting the attention of the largest number of audience members is the more dramatic, low-taste content. Films, television plays, newspaper accounts, or magazine stories that stress physical violence, brutality, sexual gratification, earthy humor, slapstick , or simple melodrama appeal most to those whose educational backgrounds are limited. Their prior socialization has not provided them with sensitive standards for appreciation of the arts or for judging the cultural, educational or moral merits of a given communication within complex frameworks. In the affluent American society, it is this type of audience member who is by far the most numerous. He has the purchasing power in sufficient abundance so that his confined influence on the market is overwhelming. He is in full possession of the media."[15]

Stated simply, then, what the creeping cycle theory predicts is this: As long as the factors listed in the above quotation remain in the economic system of the U.S., and as long as there is no effective control over content by government or some other agency or group, *the trend toward greater transgressions of conservative norms will continue in the mass media* as the

years ahead unfold. Indeed, if this theory is correct, our media will turn more and more to trivial content, higher levels of violence, more explicit sex and an escalation in the use of vulgar language.

The cycle began with the first daily newspapers. During the 1830s, five factors came together in New York City that were to provide the beginnings of the both the Age of Mass Communication and the foundation of the creeping cycle of desensitization. Those factors, in one form or another, have been a part of the context within which the American mass media have operated since that time. Factor one was *a new source of power*—specifically the steam engine—that could be used to drive many kinds of machines to increase vastly their capacity to produce products. One such application was to the Napier cylinder press, which in 1830 was refined by Robert Hoe. The steam-driven rotary press revolutionized printing, making it possible almost overnight to turn out a remarkable 8,000 copies of a newspaper sheet every hour. The old hand-operated press could print only a couple of hundred per day at best.[16] This new printing technology was a major factor permitting the Age of Mass Communication to begin.

Factor two came in the form of a *new type of newspaper*–one intended not for a small list of well-educated, thoughtful and affluent subscribers, as had been the case with American papers up to that time. The new newspaper was designed for a humbler audience—working people who had learned to read, but for whom the daily paper was as much a form of entertainment as enlightenment. It was, of course the *New York Sun*, founded in 1833 by Benjamin H. Day, a printer who saw that the new steam-driven press could produce an almost unlimited number of copies every day.

Factor three was *a new way of making a profit* on such a newspaper. Day decided to give his paper away virtually free! He charged only a penny for a copy–which almost anyone could afford, but which would hardly recover the cost of the ink. However, he realized that New York City was a center of retailing and services in the growing nation. The new factories in the northeast were producing goods for consumers as never before. Day saw that stores and service-suppliers needed more effective ways to *advertise*. While advertising had long played some part

in the revenue stream of newspapers and early magazines, Day saw that if he could distribute thousands of papers a day, he could greatly increase the exposure of the public to advertisements. That would enable him to charge advertisers much higher fees for space, supporting the paper financially and producing a high profit margin. Thus, by pricing his paper for only a penny he did, in fact, greatly increase its circulation. That was very appealing to advertisers who wanted their messages to be seen by as many people as possible, and they paid handsomely.

Factor four was *literacy*. More and more people were acquiring a basic ability to read. The United States, in the early decades of the 19th century, was scarcely a society of well-educated citizens. Yet, the concept of free, tax-supported and mandatory education—introduced by Horace Mann in the early 1800s in Massachusetts—was swiftly spreading among the states. Children were gaining a foundation of reading, writing and arithmetic that would enable them to participate more effectively in the democratic political process as well as in the emerging industrial order. Thus, while literacy rates were still relatively low in the 1830s and 1840s, they had started to increase rapidly—especially in major urban centers like New York City. A large audience, in other words, was developing for a new medium—a mass newspaper designed for everyday people. What came together in Benjamin Day's innovation was exactly that—an entertaining newspaper that could be rapidly produced to be read by a large number of people who could readily afford the cheap price made possible by financing it through advertising.

Only one factor remained. The *content* of that new mass medium had to be consistent with the tastes and interests of its readers so as to expand and retain the large audience. Earlier, the limited circulation colonial newspapers devoted most of their space to "serious" information. They carried reports of debates in political circles, the opinions of learned citizens, essays on morals and manners, and accounts of commercial transactions that were of interest to the business community.

Benjamin Day realized that this was not what the majority of people wanted. He believed that they would like content that was more entertaining. Therefore, he dropped the high literary

standards of earlier papers and developed a witty style that made his stories fun to read. He emphasized the "human side" of the news. He hired George Wisner, the first professional newspaper reporter, to attend the early morning sessions of the police court, where the troubles of pickpockets, pimps and prostitutes picked up during the night were aired. Wisner wrote a lively "Police Office" column every day, with accounts that ordinary New Yorkers enjoyed reading. One reason that readers responded so favorably was that there wasn't much else in the form of entertainment in the lives of simple people at the time. Day ran reports of crimes, scandals in high places, sensational events such as murders, human situations with pathos and humor, and even completely false accounts about exciting events that never actually happened.

Such content was much more entertaining than dull reports of speeches in high places. As a result, by 1839, only six years after its founding, the daily circulation of the New York Sun had reached a remarkable 50,000. It was an astounding achievement and a true revolution in newspaper publishing. Day's success quickly spawned a number of imitators and rivals who competed for readers. The Age of Mass Communication had begun!

From the time of Benjamin Day forward to the present, American mass media have operated in a very specific context not of their own making. They function in a *highly competitive capitalistic economic system*—one in which the approved goal of making a profit is an essential fact of life. To make that profit, the content they supply must be appreciated, enjoyed and valued by those who attend to the medium so that their numbers can be maximized. Thus, the basic economic and political context within which the mass media in the United States operate, boils down to three major features of the society. These are: (1) *economic capitalism*, (2) almost complete *freedom from government restraint* regarding content, and (3) a public whose norms of taste and sophistication of interests are, for the most part, *low and limited*.

Once started, the cycle continued. It was within that context a bit later that Randolph Hearts developed "yellow journalism." It was, in many ways, an extension of the strategy used by Benjamin Day. By the first decade of the 1900s, scores of critics were raising a howling chorus of protests about the content of the big city newspapers and the trend to lower quality was

temporarily halted. It was not only a reaction to yellow journalism as such, but also to the negative influences on their readers that newspapers were assumed to have. Those who controlled and produced the major urban papers were vilified by many intellectuals because their influences on their readers were thought to be powerful new type of cheap daily newspaper was still in its infancy, Horace Greeley maintained that the new type of newspapers were:

> . . .willing to fan into destroying flames the hellish passions that now slumber in the bosom of society. The guilt of murder may not stain their hands; but the fouler guilt of making murderers surely does.[17]

Indeed, there seemed little doubt that this new phenomenon in the world—the cheap and sensational daily newspaper—was at the bottom of many of the current ills of society. For example, by the late 1800s, the French jurist and social scientist, Gabriel Tarde believed that the influence of the sensational daily newspaper was every bit as damaging as that of the excessive use of alcohol. Writing in 1897, he blamed the press for stimulating cowardice and weakness of character among the young offenders that came before the courts:

> But it is the trashy and malicious press, scandal-mongering, riddled with court cases, that awaits the student when he leaves school. The little newspaper, supplementing the little drink, alcoholizes his heart.[18]

Over nearly a century, then, the cycle unfolded in the world of newspaper publishing. Newspapers became increasingly sensational, preoccupied with entertaining rather than enlightening the public. The cutting edge of content was pushed toward ever more reports of sex, crime, corruption and fake events. However, people eventually tired of sensational and misleading newspapers. A reaction set in, slowing the cycle. People wanted a more responsible press. Faced with growing opposition, journalists retreated into an "objective" style that supposedly separated opinion from fact and that gave space to both sides of controversial issues.

Today, all of the media delivering news are locked in intense competition because of the explosive growth of the number of communication channels available. Americans can learn what

is going on from newspapers, news magazines, radio, broadcast, cable and satellite television, and the Internet. With the news-delivery pie cut into so many pieces, the competition to attract audience attention to advertising by reporting the news has become truly brutal. Journalists absolutely must produce stories that interest the public. The days of in-depth, but boring reporting of details about a significant news event may have almost come to an end.

The creeping cycle of desensitization is particularly obvious in the continuing development of the motion picture. In their search for profits early in their history, movie moguls began to produce content that conservative segments of the public found objectionable. Unprotected by the First Amendment (at the time) movies came to be banned and theaters closed by local groups The studios then cleaned up their own house with a restrictive code for film production and distribution.

As the decades moved on, the codes came to be abandoned. Films were depicting the life of gangsters, portraying them with easy but tainted money, fast cars and fast women. Many saw that these were portrayals of a glamorous image—not of disgusting evil-doers. Their fear was that such portrayals could cause youngsters to want to imitate such lifestyles. Even worse, the gangsters used guns to "bump off" their opponents—and even to do battle with law enforcement officials. This was not a wholesome lesson in good citizenship, designed to instruct America's youth in socially accepted conduct. It was certainly not an accurate depiction of life in the U.S.

Indeed, in some of the movies during the late 1920s, women were actually shown on screen *in their undergarments*! Even worse, couples appeared *in bedrooms together* with women dressed, or partially undressed, in this manner. To be sure, the undergarments shown did cover the ladies rather fully from the top of their bosoms to upper thigh level, but such depictions were shocking at the time, to say the least. While the older generation was upset, younger movie patrons (the majority of the audience) couldn't get enough!

As the 1920s moved on, demands to clean up the movies grew louder and louder. Always sensitive to sources of votes, members of Congress spoke out, assuring the good citizens in their districts that their concerns were being heard. Proposals were made to hold congressional

hearings focusing on the possible corrupting influences of the movies and ways in which the industry might be controlled. Angry editorials appeared in the local press. Preachers warned their flocks that sinful things were to be seen at the picture palace. Academics entered the controversy. Between 1927 and 1929, a massive research project on the influences of motion pictures on youth was undertaken by a team of distinguished social scientists (*the Payne Fund Studies*). Its findings seemed to confirm the worst fears of movie critics. The research showed that children were being influenced in a number of negative ways.[19] Parents reacted with deep concern.

Finally, those many voices were heard by the movie industry itself. The studios had gone too far in attempting to maximize their audiences. In developing a protective strategy, the producers got together, formed an association (The Motion Picture Association of America, Inc.) They decided that they had better clean up their own house. To do this, they adopted a "code"—a complex set of written rules and each member of the Association agreed to its standards. Beginning in 1930, then, under the provisions of the *Code*, the motion pictures seen by American audiences were no longer a threat to anyone's morals, even by the strictest standards.

This was the era of cute little Shirley Temple, singing "The Good Ship Lollipop." It was a time when audiences flocked to see Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers dancing glamorously in a tuxedo and a long gown. People laughed at the antics of the Marx Brothers, Laurel and Hardy and the Three Stooges. They marveled at *The Wizard of Oz, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, and many adventure stories or literary classics brought to the screen. Nowhere in any commercial screen in America was there shown a nude breast, a person sipping booze, or a criminal who went unpunished. If there had been, the public would have been outraged. Indeed, when Clark Gable (in the role of Rhet Butler in *Gone with the Wind)* turned to Vivien Leigh, playing Scarlet O'Hara, and said *"*Frankly my dear, *I don't give a damn,"* his vulgar language created a chorus of criticism.

Almost overnight following World War Two, the motion picture industry was in financial trouble. By 1950, television stations were going on the air in major cities all over the country.

People were buying the remarkable new machines like there was no tomorrow. They were the marvel of the age because they had screens that showed moving images right there in the home. They were expensive. The screens were small. The pictures were black and white and often less than clear. *But they moved!* Within a span of only ten years, 90 percent of American homes had a TV set. Programming that had been on radio since its beginning moved to television—soap operas, sports broadcasts, comedy shows, evening drama and news. The same was true of advertisers and radio was suddenly in deep trouble as well as the movies. Families no longer had to drive to a theater and buy tickets. If they wanted cheap entertainment, all the had to do was turn on their TV sets at home. They could view popular comedians, cop dramas, soap operas, musical shows, amateur hours, children's shows, and many more. Everything came over the air at first, but then community antennas and early cable systems quickly expanded the number of channels that people could receive. Screens became larger and color arrived. Television was rapidly becoming the dominant medium of the nation.

Receipts at the motion picture box office plummeted. It was a financial disaster. By 1970, things were even worse. Desperate to meet this competition, the movie industry turned first to *technology*. Screens got much wider; sound systems more elaborate; color more natural. It made no difference. Ticket sales remained down.

As it became increasingly clear that much more drastic steps were needed to salvage the industry, film-makers began to dump the earlier restrictive production *Code*. It did not happen overnight. The studios were not sure what the public would accept, but they began to experiment with increases in violence, sex and vulgar language. By this time, however, the movie audience was mainly younger people who were less bound by the more restrictive norms of the past. The older folks stayed home, watched TV and seldom went to the movies.

As the years moved on, the motion picture producers pressed the cutting edge of norm transgression onward, hoping to lure people back to the theaters with higher and higher levels of things that many in their audiences wanted to see—more violence, more and more dirty words, and increasingly revealing sexual portrayals. There were protests. Religious leaders devised

advisory "codes" for their parishioners to use to select the movies they would pay to see. They made little difference. The Association's production code of 1930-50 had prevented movies with controversial themes and depictions from even being *produced.* The news ones were supposed serve merely as *advice* to parents and others about content that they might find inappropriate. For the most part, people who went to the movies paid little attention—and for understandable reasons. Few patrons checked on the code before selecting what they wanted to see. After paying at the box office, and getting seated in the theater, an announcement on the screen might proclaim that the movie they were about to view was rated in a particular category. Few people at that point decided to get up and leave and demand their money back.

The movie makers simply had to try a more effective strategy to make profits. The result was that they turned to depictions and portrayals that had been strongly prohibited under the old *Code*. Increasingly, sexual love-making was filmed in more detailed and realistic ways. Nude breasts became much more common. Levels of violence soared. The language spoken by the actors became increasingly course. By the end of the 20th century, four-letter words were as common in the films as they were among the most foul-mouthed males hanging out on the street corner. Many older movie patrons were embarrassed by what they heard in the theater or on their TV screen when a movie was playing. The younger patrons either did not care or loved it.

Even today, however, there are still a few lines in the sand that are not being crossed—but not many are left. By the beginning of the new millennium, total frontal female nudity, with all body parts visible were being seen on American screens. The same was true of graphic lesbian scenes of nude love-making (e.g., both appeared in the film *Eyes Wide Shut*). There was still a strong reluctance to show total male frontal nudity with erect genitalia, to depict the full details of oral sex, or display serious love-making by homosexual males. In 2002, other lines were crossed. The film *Austin Powers as Goldmember* (rated PG-13) was, according to movie critic Richard Corliss, basically "toilet humor," including a scene where one actor urinates into the mouth of another. Also included to amuse the children, he notes, were gags about penis size, excrement and farts. In his opinion such films (aimed at children) are "gross-outs."

Today, first-run movies shown are not only in theaters, but quickly become available in VCR and DVD form. Counterfeit versions of these can be purchased on the streets of virtually any city in the world. Many relatively recent movies can be seen on pay-per-view cable channels as well. Thus, the convergence of film and television, even the computer screen, has become a reality. The products of movie producers are seen in all of the countries studied in the present project. They are the *window on reality* for teen-agers and others as well. They are the *shadows on the wall of the cave* from which young people put togther their conceptions of Americans and their way of life. With no way that they can personally leave their cave, they learn what Americans are like in a process of communication—with the mass media yielding much of what they know about Americans and the realities of life in the U.S.

It is important to note that the creeping cycle described in some detail above is by no means restricted to motion pictures. Space forbids an extended discussion of how the trends described have also been a part of the history of each American medium. Similar cycles can (and have been) observed with respect to the content of television programming, Internet content, comic books, video games and popular music. All of these media have sought higher profits and less restrictive norms by dropping the barriers on what was once forbidden themes and content. Combined with the previous theory describing the social construction of reality, then, the creeping cycle of desensitization suggests that even more negative portrayals of Americans and their way of life lie ahead.

The concepts, variables, conditions, generalizations and changing standards that have been discussed in the sections above can be brought together into a set of formal propositions—a summary of the theory that both describes and explains major trends in media content in the United States. That formal summary is set forth on the page that follows.

It is important to understand that the same cyclic pattern may also be found in certain other countries that have similar political and economic institutions. What has been described is a set of necessary conditions playing a critical part in bringing about changes in media content. If present, those managing the media must produce a certain type of content. At the beginning, that

content was consistent with conservative norms of society—at least for a time. As earning profits became increasingly important, and more and more difficult in a competitive environment, content became progressively became more sensational. Sexual depictions became increasingly graphic. The level of violence in drama and other content increased. There was an increase in the use of four-letter words and other vulgar language. This was not a phenomenon restricted to a single medium, but a pervasive pattern that can be observed more widely in almost all of the media—print, film, broadcast and digital—that deliver news and entertainment to the public.

Generally, then, the present discussion of the creeping cycle presents one explanation of why the American media—and indeed those of other countries that have similar economic and political systems—have seen a particular pattern over time in their media content. That explanation attempts to show that what happens to news and entertainment products in a society is in many ways shaped by the social, economic, and political conditions that create demand for certain kinds of media content.

The implications for the present study of teen-age beliefs and attitudes toward Americans is that, insofar as they are influenced by the content of Western mass media, to which they are widely exposed, there are few grounds to assume that those beliefs and attitudes will become more positive.

THE CREEPING CYCLE OF DESENSITIZATION THEORY: A FORMAL SUMMARY

1. The communication industries producing entertainment products, such as newspapers and other print media, radio, television, popular music, the Internet and video games, do so within a system of economic capitalism, in which making profits is an essential and highly approved goal.

2. Making a profit on an entertainment product follows the classical principles of competitive and market-driven capitalism—keeping costs down while offering a commodity or experience for which a maxim number of consumers will pay in one form or another.

3. The types of type of entertainment products that attract the largest number of paying consumers are those that emphasize socially controversial themes, such as sensationalism, sex, violence and vulgarity.

4. In the United States, due to the protections of the First Amendment to the Constitution, there are few legal or political restraints on what content such an entertainment product can contain and be presented to the public.

5. What is acceptable in the content of such entertainment products is largely left to audience tastes and the cultural norms that define what various categories of people will or will not tolerate.

6. The largest category of consumers providing the largest profits from most such products are young people who care little for the conservative tastes and restraining cultural norms of older people (whose numbers are smaller) as they actively seek pleasure and excitement.

7. For that reason, producers of entertainment products—seeking ever-larger profits in a highly competitive economic but protected environment—will constantly increase depictions of sensational topics, sex, violence and vulgarity until a sufficient number of the public, or various leaders, protest strongly.

8. **Therefore**, if the outcry threatens their industry, the producers will stop, or even temporarily reverse, the transgressions of norms. But in a creeping cycle of desensitization, the producers will move the cutting edge of transgressions forward again after the public protest becomes muted.

Shaping Beliefs Little-by-Little: The Accumulation of Minimal Effects

One final theory explaining the influences of mass media content needs to be considered in the interrelated trio that is being used to help explain the findings of the present project. It is a theory that replaced early interpretations by social scientists of the effects and influences of the mass media. In the late 1800s, when only print media were available, it was assumed that media messages were like "magic bullets" that struck every eye and ear and had effects on their audiences that were that were *immediate*, *direct* and *universal*. This magic bullet theory was abandoned long ago. It was replaced by other theories that explained media influences in less

powerful ways. One such theory is relevant to the present discussion as part of the trio of explanations of the findings presented earlier. Its propositions are listed later in this section.

After several decades of intensive research by communication scholars following World War II, it became widely accepted that mass communications had only *selective and limited effects* on their audiences. Hundreds of experiments and other kinds of research studying different kinds of persuasive messages aimed at changing people's beliefs, attitudes and behavior failed to reveal any really strong, immediate or universal influences on subjects.

At the same time, year-after-year, changes could be observed taking place in society that many scholars believed were significantly influenced by the media. Thus, there was a dilemma concerning the ability of the media to influence people's ideas and behavior. Scientific research revealed a picture of *weak media having only limited influence* on people at best. But systematic observation of ongoing events in society suggested a much more powerful role. For example it appeared to many observers that mass communication played a significant part in bringing about such changes as Richard Nixon's resignation due to the events of Watergate, the civil rights movement of the 1960's, the redefinition of the View Nam war that took place in the United States, and more recently, many changes related to smoking and other health behavior.

Clearly, some way of resolving this apparent dilemma was needed. Are the media powerful or weak? Both the scientific research and the careful observation of historical events seemed to lead to sound conclusions --- even if they were completely opposite. Finally, it was understood that almost all of the scientific research that had been done was based on *short-term studies*, making use of brief experiments and one-time surveys. The historical observations of changes in society extended over time. The resolution of the dilemma came when it was realized that both conclusions could be correct. In a short-term sense, the media may have only selective and limited influences. But over a long period, small changes in a few people at a time can eventually *add up* to bring about significant influences on many.

As it turned out, it was those issues on which the media focused *repeatedly and in relatively consistent ways* that seemed to change people over time. If those conditions prevailed,

and if the various media—print, broadcast and film—corroborated each other by presenting the same interpretations, *truly significant changes* could take place in people's beliefs, attitudes and behavior. From these considerations the theory of the accumulation of minimal effects was developed.[20] It provided answers to the dilemma noted above, that under certain conditions, the media can have both minimal effects in the short term and powerful effects over an extended period. The basic propositions can be set forth as follows:

THE THEORY OF ACCUMULATION OF MINIMAL EFFECTS: A FORMAL SUMMARY

1. The mass media focus their attention on and transmit messages about a specific topic—some problem, situation or issue (e.g. American life-styles).

2. Over an extended period they continue to do so in a relatively *consistent* and p*ersistent* way and their presentations *corroborate* each other.

3. Individual members of the audience increasingly become aware of these messages and, on a person-by-person basis, a growing comprehension develops of the interpretations of the topic presented by the media.

4. Increasing comprehension of the messages supplied by the media, begins to form (or modify) the meanings, beliefs and attitudes that serve as guides to behavior of the audience regarding the topic**.**

5. **Therefore**, minor individual-by-individual changes *accumulate*, and new beliefs and attitudes emerge to provide significant changes in norms of appropriate behavior toward the topic

.

In conclusion, the three interrelated theories discussed above are more than of academic interest. They provide an understanding of the processes by which all human beings are influenced by the communication processes in which they participate. In particular they help explain the ways in which mass communications present content that can be a factor in shaping peoples' ideas. These same theories, therefore, provide a possible explanation of why the young people studied in the present project so often entertained negative beliefs and attitudes about Americans. As was the case in Plato's imaginary experiment with the men in the cave, those

youths had little choice but to develop their understandings and interpretations of Americans *from the communication systems available to them*.

Those systems certainly include input from family, peers and many others, but they also include a great deal of content supporting the views of adults that is presented by the mass media. It is those depictions, that they can directly experience, often in exciting terms, from which they develop their realities. Thus, the process of the social construction of reality takes place today, just as it did in Plato's time. However, for the reasons explained above, the shadows available to teen-agers who absorb the media content available to them present *flawed versions of realty concerning Americans.* Over time, then, as experience with these flawed depictions accumulates, unrealistic and largely distorted understandings of what Americans are like as a people are embedded in their consciousness as valid knowledge.

An important lesson that can be derived from this extended discussion of these issues is that there is no easy way to control the communication environment of people whom a communicator wants to influence. We understand how peoples' ideas and beliefs are formed, but gaining some sort of easy way to manipulate that complex communication process that will produce results quickly seems most unlikely. The keys to changing "hearts and minds" with clever media content have been sought for decades, but with little success.

A major problem is this: It is well understood that once a person has formed an evaluation of another—even someone he or she has just met—it is very difficult to change that impression. In particular, impressions and images that have been deeply established over a number of years, and are reinforced by peers, family and the mass media are very difficult indeed to modify.

Thus, the notion that some sort of clever propaganda—perhaps modeled after the practices of the advertising industry—can quickly achieve that goal is naive, to say the least. For example, the present results imply that many of the beliefs about Americans held by teen-agers in the countries studied were influenced by depictions encountered in the media—both in news and entertainment products. Even if somehow a government can exercise tight controls over

what the media present, and produce their own more favorable content, significant influences on peoples' deep-seated beliefs and attitudes are not assured. That was tried for years by some governments during both World War Two and during the Cold War. Movies about heroic tractor drivers plowing fields for the betterment of humanity, or patriotic truck drivers being kind to little children, were not taken all that seriously by many people who viewed them.

Keeping negative depictions out of the mass media is not a realistic goal in a democratic society. In the U.S., the First Amendment keeps government from shaping the production and distribution of media content and there is little prospect that any kind of control over those processes can (or should) be exercised. As the three theories discussed earlier suggest, what is distributed will continue to have influences, and those influences are not likely to be helpful in improving the image of the people of the United States.

At the same time, although it is difficult to change deep-seated beliefs and attitudes, it is not impossible. One key is time. Just as it has taken a 17-year-old a number of years to form his or her beliefs, it may take many years to modify them. Accumulation theory indicates that messages can make a difference over a long period when they are *persistent* and *consistent*. Under such conditions, the individual evaluative beliefs that make up an attitude can be modified, one at a time. As explained by the theory, such changes can be cumulative, resulting in a modification of the overall attitude itself.

If this can be accomplished—even one person at a time, like grains of sand—eventually a sort of "critical mass" of individuals will begin to share similar views. Those modified views can become the norm among them, which will provide the foundation for even broader societal change. Indeed, this same strategy does work. It has been used in public information campaigns to persuade individuals to stop smoking, use seat belts, get more exercise, etc. Those long-term efforts have not been completely successful, but progress has been made.

There are certain clues in the results of this project that offer potential strategies for information campaigns. For example, Subscale Three (see Figure 28) shows that not all the young people studied firmly believed that Americans lack humanitarian values. Indeed, those in

five of the nations were either neutral or positive in their beliefs on this issue. Even the remaining seven were not as negative as on other dimensions of belief. This implies that media messages in both news and entertainment products emphasizing the humanitarian values of Americans would have some chance in the long term of changing beliefs concerning this view.

Subscale Two (see Figure 27) indicates a more serious situation, regarding beliefs that Americans are cultural imperialists. Here the youths in all but two of the countries were to some degree negative. In five they were very clearly so. It is difficult to envision a strategy that could modify such beliefs, even over a lengthy period. The military activities and other official policies and actions taken by the U.S. government in recent decades may have defined Americans as dominating and much less than peaceful. In addition, the presence of many kinds of American products on the streets and in the stores of countries the world over can suggest that Americans are determined to exploit others as markets for their goods. The fact that many of these products come to those countries, not only from American exporters but also in many cases from multinational corporations generating profits. In addition, those who purchase such products obviously want them. No one is "forcing" American goods or services on anyone.

Perhaps the only suggestion that can be made here is to include in military briefings and related official news releases that the exercise of military or economic power is being undertaking not for imperialistic purposes but to assist and protect others from unwanted circumstances and conditions. Obvious examples are aid to the starving in Africa, assistance for those stricken by AIDS, displacing repressive regimes in Bosnia, freeing women from the Taliban, providing economic assistance to Latin American countries, even plans to depose despots with weapons of mass destruction. None of these are or were efforts undertaken for territorial gain, or some other imperialistic reason, but for more humanitarian purposes. It can be suggested that this type of message needs to be emphasized by all official spokespersons with great frequency and by all channels available.

The theory of the creeping cycle of desensitization indicates that a major problem lies in the area of media depictions of Americans. For example, in only two of the countries (Italy and

Argentina) did the teen-agers studied reject the belief that "Many American women are sexually immoral." Much the same was found in the case of "Americans are generally quite violent," and "Many Americans engage in criminal activities." The discussion of the creeping cycle theory suggests that these are the themes in motion pictures and television dramas that young audiences like very much and that make profits for their producers and distributors. Moreover, such content is likely to be emphasized more and more in the future. Obviously, in the U.S. there are violent individuals, sexually loose women and criminals, but their presence is no greater than in other industrialized Western countries. Certainly, as general descriptions of Americans and their way of life, such media depictions are seriously flawed.

The social construction of reality theory indicates that such depictions can be influential in forming people's attitudes and beliefs. Obviously, strategies are needed to change those views. Again, options appear to be limited. The First Amendment prohibits interference in the production and distribution of media content. One suggestion that can be made is that steps could be taken to provide *counter-interpretations* and *warnings* that a particular entertainment or news product "is likely to provide flawed information" about Americans.

Movies and other media content that is produced in the U.S. and distributed to other countries could be reviewed to identify scenes and interpretations that present unrealistic negative images of Americans and their way of life. That does not mean interfering with their production or distribution. But, it could mean providing informative reports to people in other countries (such as movie reviews or other evaluations of media products). These could be disseminated in various ways in order to warn consumers that what they will see, read or hear is a distorted and flawed depiction of what Americans are like. Will that work? No one can say one way or another. Yet, it may be worth trying.

One possible strategy for change could be based on public information campaigns, making it clear to producers and distributors of media content to other nations, that what they are now providing has in many cases become a source of very negative and harmful definitions of Americans and their way of life. The development of public opinion and sentiment against such

practices could serve as a deterrent.

Labeling presents another possibility. Such products as tobacco, alcohol and certain medications are currently required to carry labels warning of consequences if they are carelessly consumed. Such labels may (or may not) have major results, but over a long period that are likely to influence the behavior of at least some. Such labels could be informative in much the same manner as those currently used to advise parents and others about violence, sexual content, etc. Perhaps the bottom line is that none of these suggestions is likely to change what is already in place any time soon . The teen-agers of the next generation already have formed their attitudes and beliefs about the negative characteristic of Americans. It seems likely, therefore that Americans will continue to have to confront what was discussed in the three perspectives noted earlier—a *political* perspective that includes threats of terrorism, a *public health* perspective concerning the kinds of stresses that these bring, and an *economic* perspective that includes the possibility of rejection of investment opportunities, goods and services produced in the United States.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

[1] A comment is in order concerning the background of the researchers, their source of financial support and their reasons for conducting this study. That comment is this: Any study that has potential political or economic implications these days can seem to be suspect in the minds of some. Questions can be raised about who funded the study. What were the goals and motivations of those who supplied the funds? What are the characteristics of the researchers, and how might their commitments and loyalties tempt them to color or slant the results? To set the record clear on those issues, the following facts are in order. No government agency or private group funded this study. The researchers payed all the costs involved from their own pockets. The characteristics of the researchers that might bias their report are these: Both are university professors teaching students from many parts of the world. Neither is a member of either political party, or has a positive or negative orientation to either. Both have served in the Armed Forces of the United States. (Margaret DeFleur trained as a medical corpsman in the Army during the Viet Nam period, and Melvin DeFleur saw extensive combat in the South Pacific as a U. S. Marine during World War Two.) Their motivation for conducting the study was to try and uncover the views, attitudes and beliefs about Americans held by the next generation in the countries studied, and to offer their results to those who might make use of their findings to increase the security of the people of the United States.

[2] Evidence is already accumulating that terrorism acts and threats are posing psychological problems of stress and anxiety among some Americans. For example, a study of more than 1,000 adults in Manhattan indicated that nearly 10 percent of the people studied were having stress disorders.(See: Erica Goode, "A Nation Challenged: Mental Health,"*New York Times* March 28, 2002, p. A-15.) Another news article reported a study of 8,300 school children conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The report indicated that thousands of children around the country were experiencing chronic nightmares, fear of public places and other mental health problems following the World Trade Center attack. (See: Abby Goodnough, "Pain Found to Linger in Young Minds," *The New York Times*, May 2, 2002, p. A-1.)

[3] *The New York Times*. Sunday, July 7th, Section 4, pp. 1 and 5.

[4] David Arnold, "US vs the World," *The Boston Globe* , Tuesday, August 20, 2002, p. D 1.

[5] *The Economist* (reporting figures obtained from the UN, the World Bank, and Institute for Management Development). June 29th – July 5th, 2002, p. 4.

[6] From Rudyard Kipling (1856-1936), *The White Man's Burden.*

[7] See, For example: "We Have to Take Muslim Anti-Americanism Seriously,"*Newsday*, March 26, 2002, p. A35; "Poll on Islamic mood Isn't Surprising,"*USA Today,* March 4, 2002, p. 11A; "Even the Kuwaitis Dislike Us," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, May 29, 2002, p. A9; "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Division," *The Times* (London), July 4, 2002.

[8] See, for example, the interpretations of Lord James Bryce concerning the role of public opinion as a basic support of political regimes and their actions. In: Margaret H. DeFleur, "James Bryce's 19th Century Theory of Public Opinion in the Contemporary Age of New Communications Technologies." Mass Communication and Society, Vol. 1, No. 1, October, 199

[9] See: Ch. 6, "The Method of Summated Ratings," pp. 149-171, in Allen Edwards, *Techniques of Attitude Scale Construction,* New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1957.

[10] See: "Viewpoints," *Newsday*, March 22, 2002, p. A35.

[11] For example, in Kuwait, the following has been reported: "Teen-agers in this country spend their evenings listening to Ja Rule and Britney Spears, watching "Friends"or "The Simpsons," and arguing over which Survivor should be kicked off next." (See: *op. Cit. The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* May 29, 2002, p. A-9).

[12] *The Republic of Plato,* trans. Francis MacDonald Cornfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958). See pp. 227-35. Plato's work was written in 387 BC.

[13] A larger proportion of their families (33.9 percent) had visited the U.S. The authors are testing the hypothesis that these visits may have resulted in less negative views of Americans. Most, however, do not appear to have been visits from the most negative counties.

[14] The formal version of the theory set forth here is taken from DeFleur and DeFleur,

Foundations of Mass Communication Theory. This work is under preparation and will be published in 2003. The issues discussed here are discussed in more detail in Chapter One.

[15] Melvin L. DeFleur, *Theories of Mass Communication* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1966) pp. 156-7.

[16] For a detailed history of the printing press, see: James Moran, *Printing Presses: History and Development from the Fifteenth Century to Modern Times* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974).

[17] Horace Greeley, *The Tribune*, 1841.

[18] Gabriel Tarde, *Selected Papers on Communication and Social Influence,* Ed. by Terry N. Clark, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 265

[19] A detailed discussion of the Creeping Cycle theory, as it applies to television, comic books, the Internet, video games and other media will be found in Margaret H. DeFleur and Melvin L. DeFleur, *Foundations of Mass Communication Theory* (forthcoming, 2003).

[20] See Melvin L. DeFleur, *op. Cit.*

Figure 1: OVERALL ATTITUDES TOWARD AMERICANS

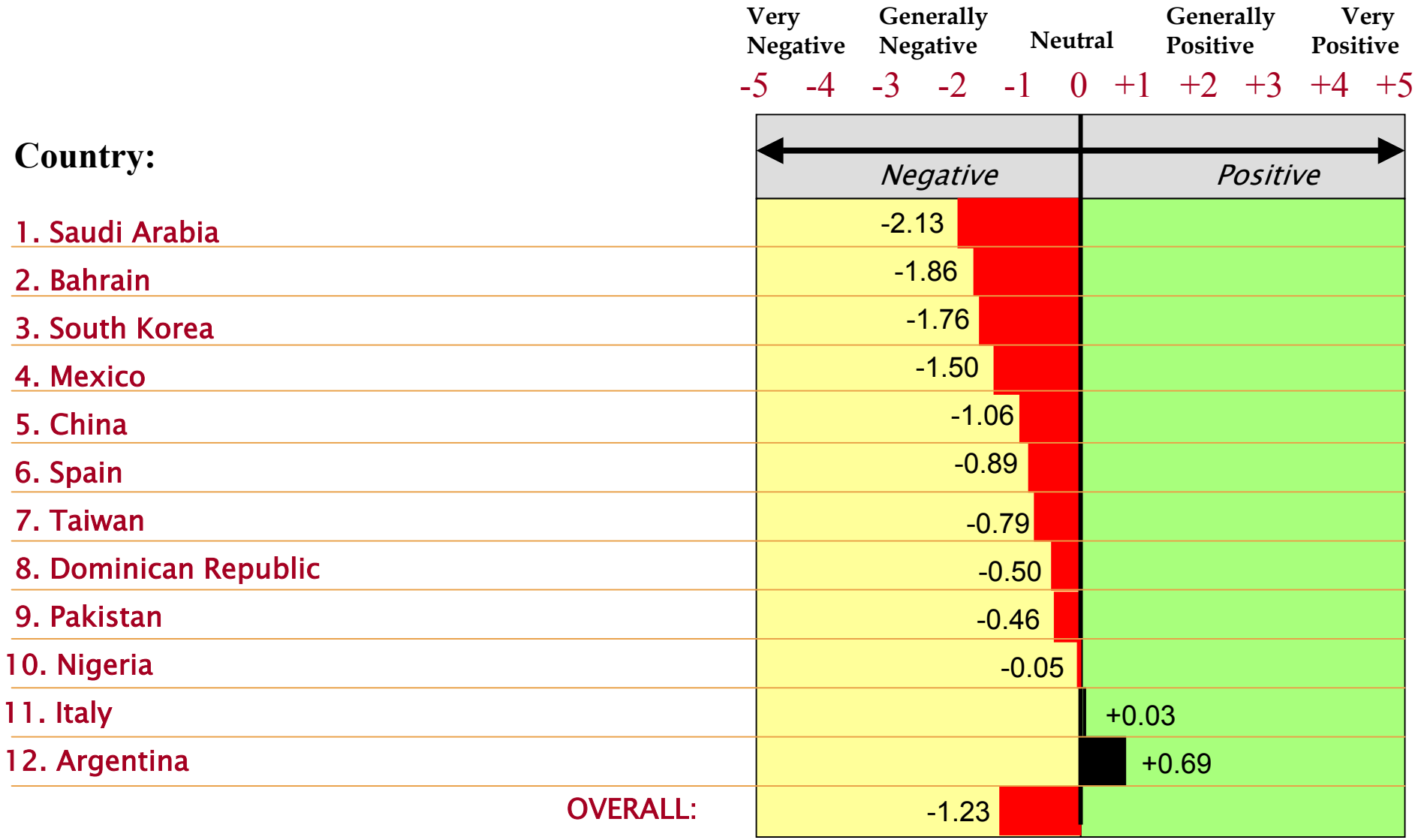

Figure 2: PROFILE OF SPECIFIC BELIEFS ABOUT AMERICANS

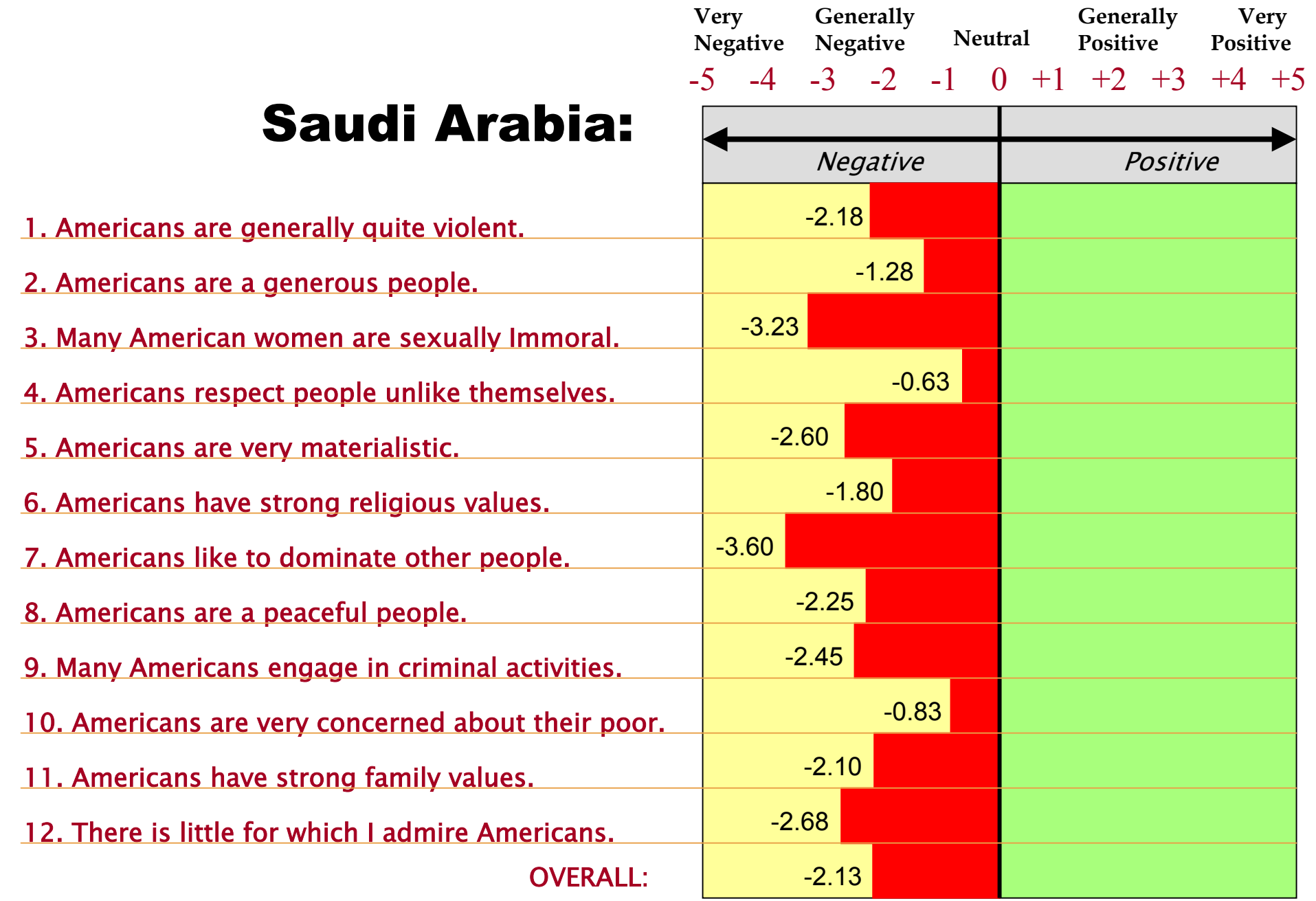

Figure 3: PROFILE OF SPECIFIC BELIEFS ABOUT AMERICANS

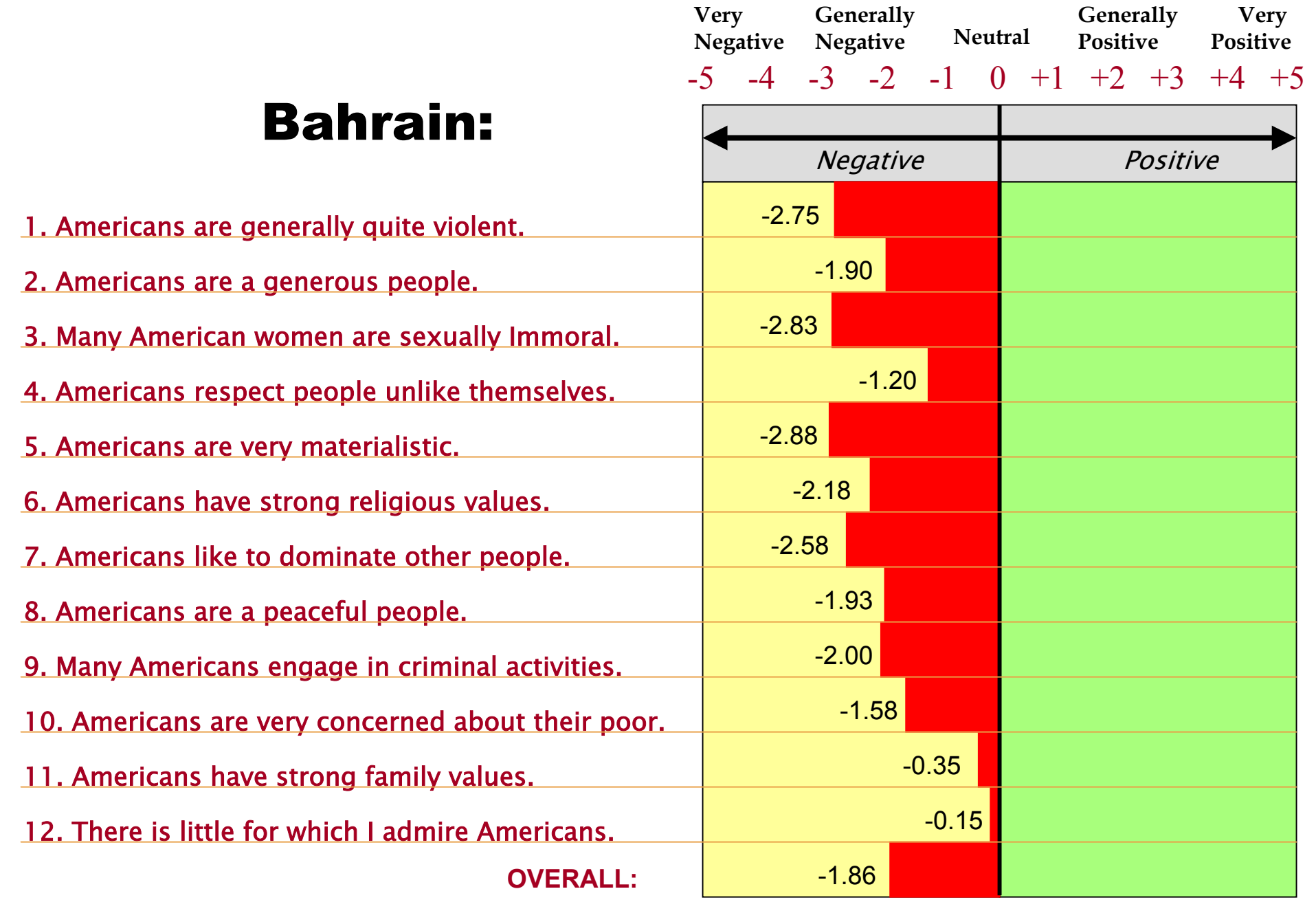

Figure 4: PROFILE OF SPECIFIC BELIEFS ABOUT AMERICANS

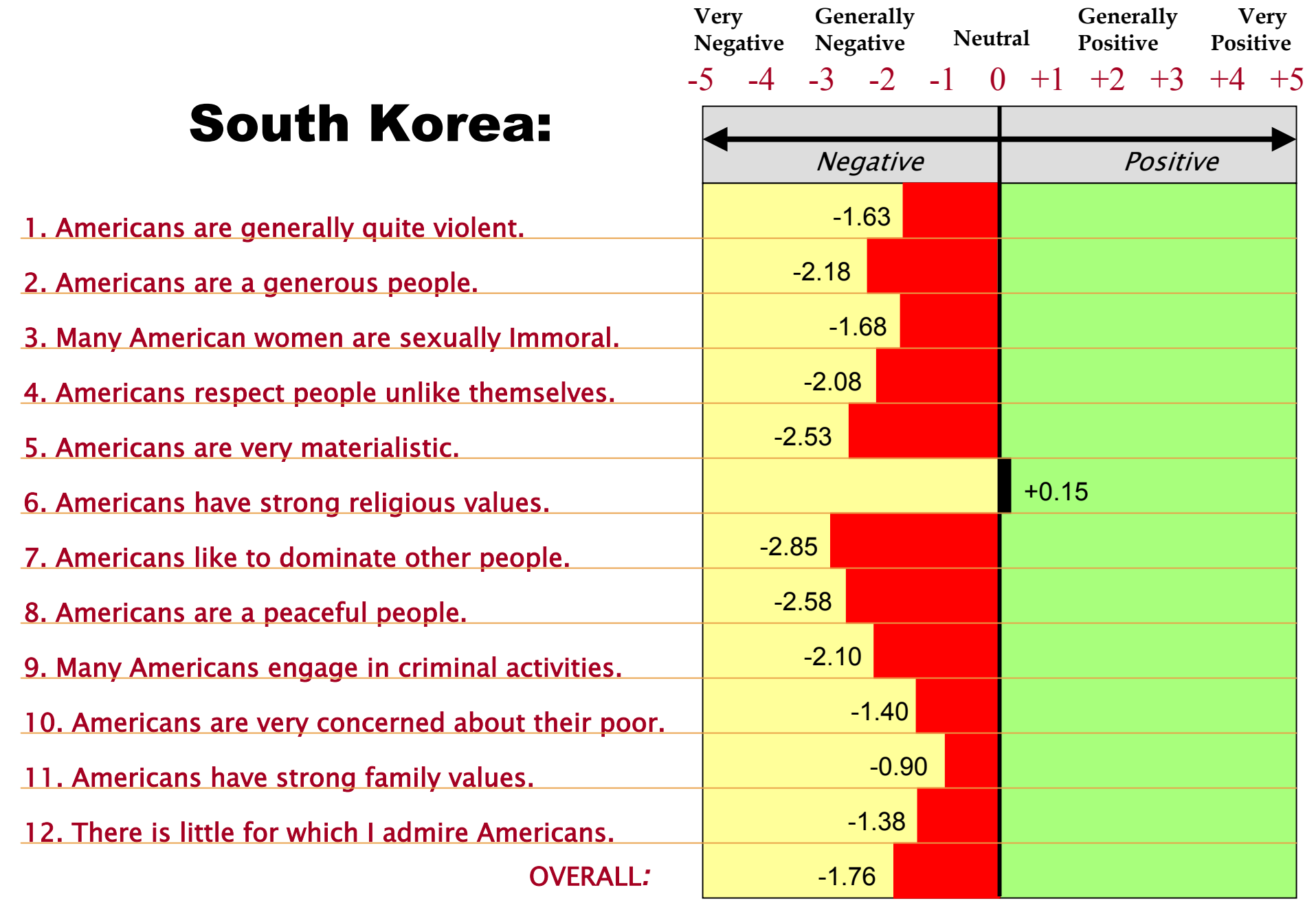

Figure 5: PROFILE OF SPECIFIC BELIEFS ABOUT AMERICANS

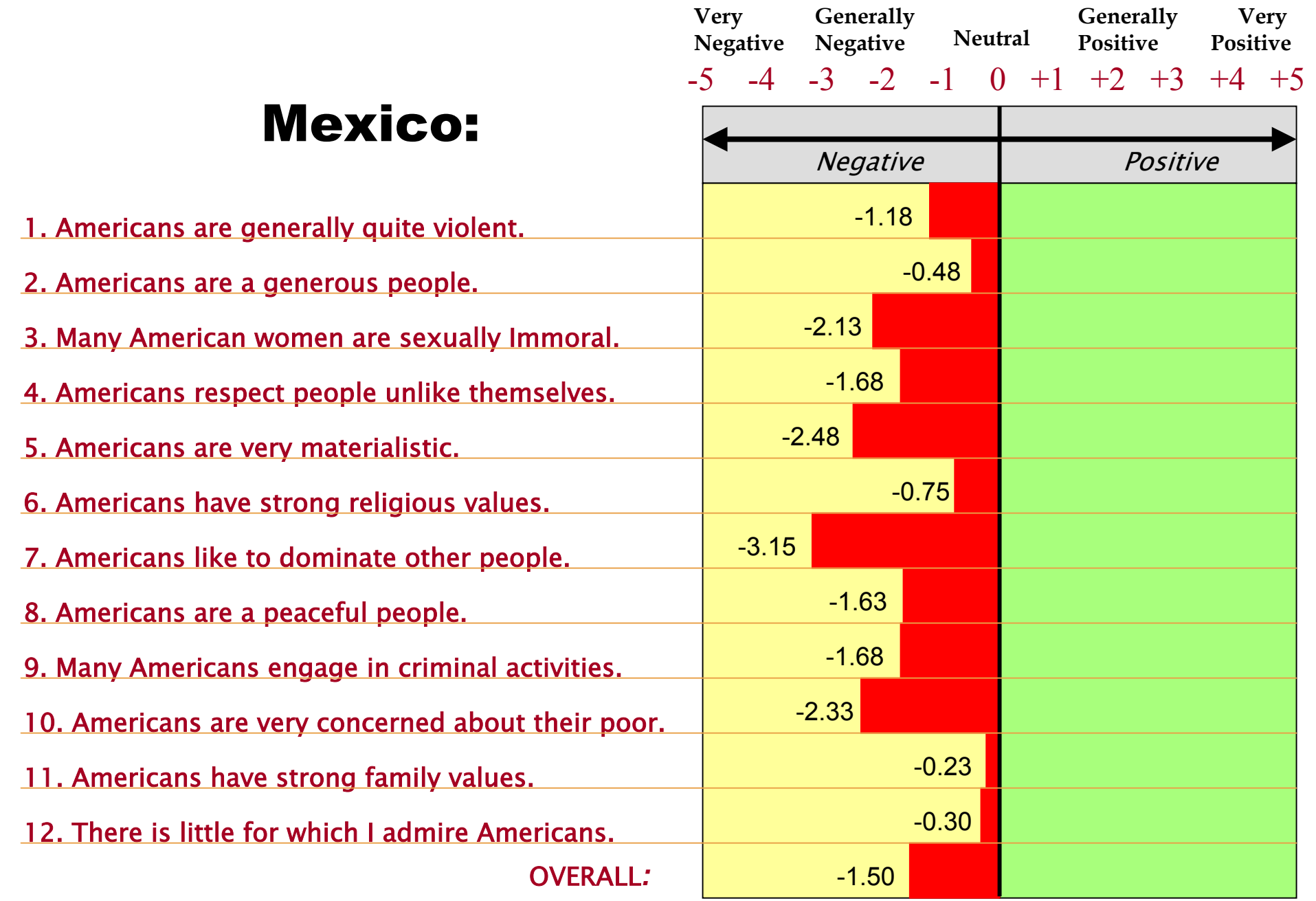

Figure 6: PROFILE OF SPECIFIC BELIEFS ABOUT AMERICANS

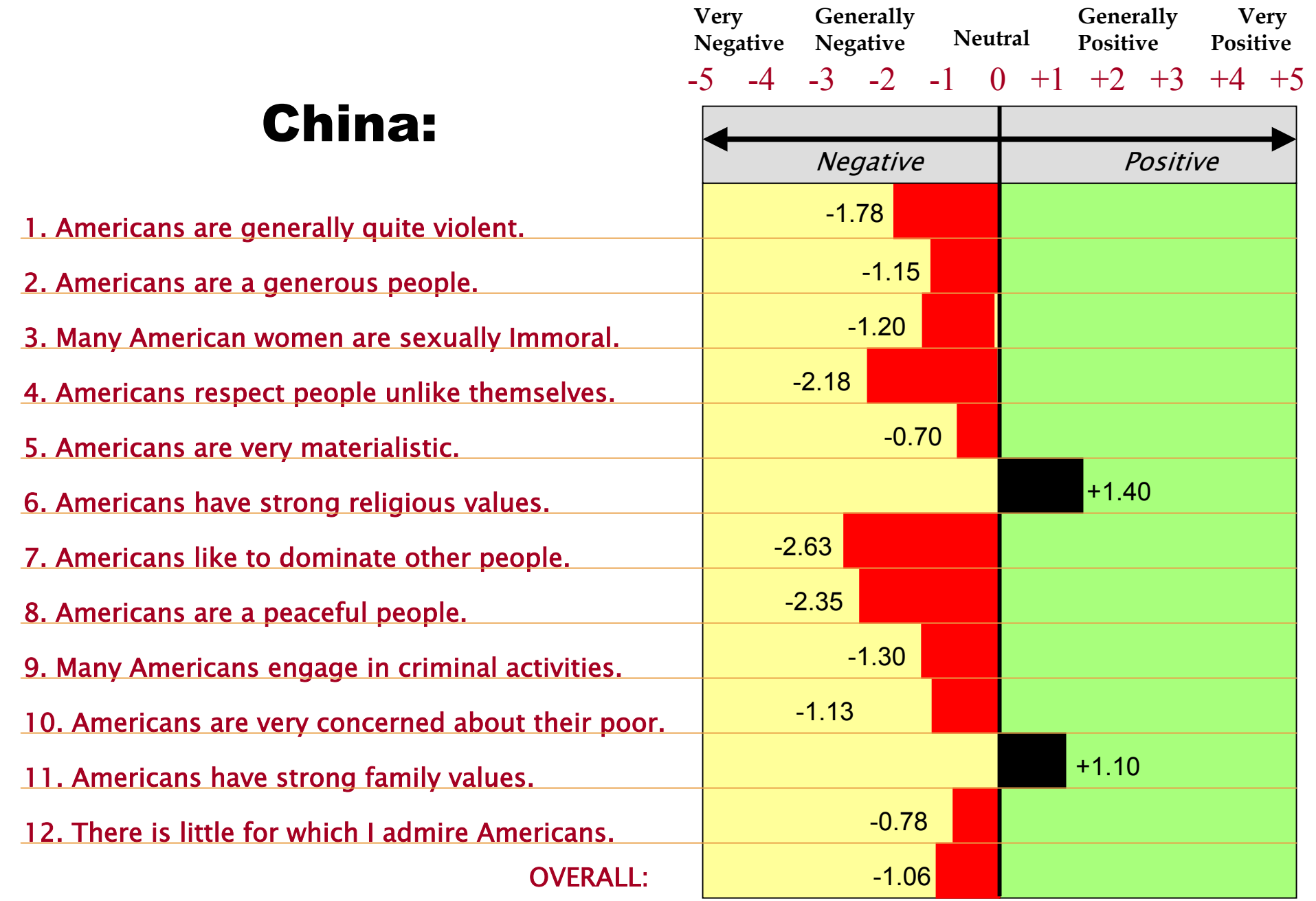

Figure 7: PROFILE OF SPECIFIC BELIEFS ABOUT AMERICANS

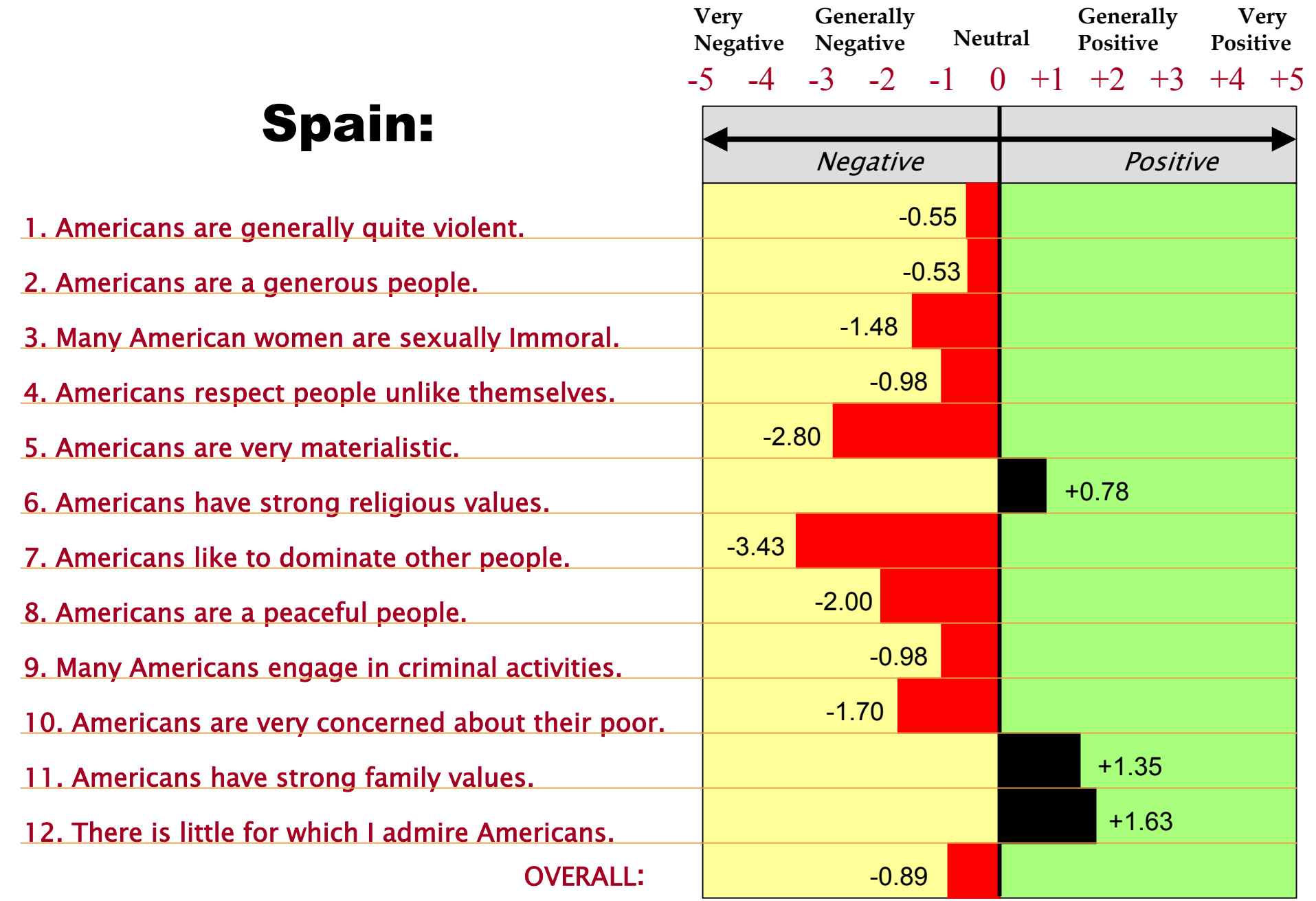

Figure 8: PROFILE OF SPECIFIC BELIEFS ABOUT AMERICANS

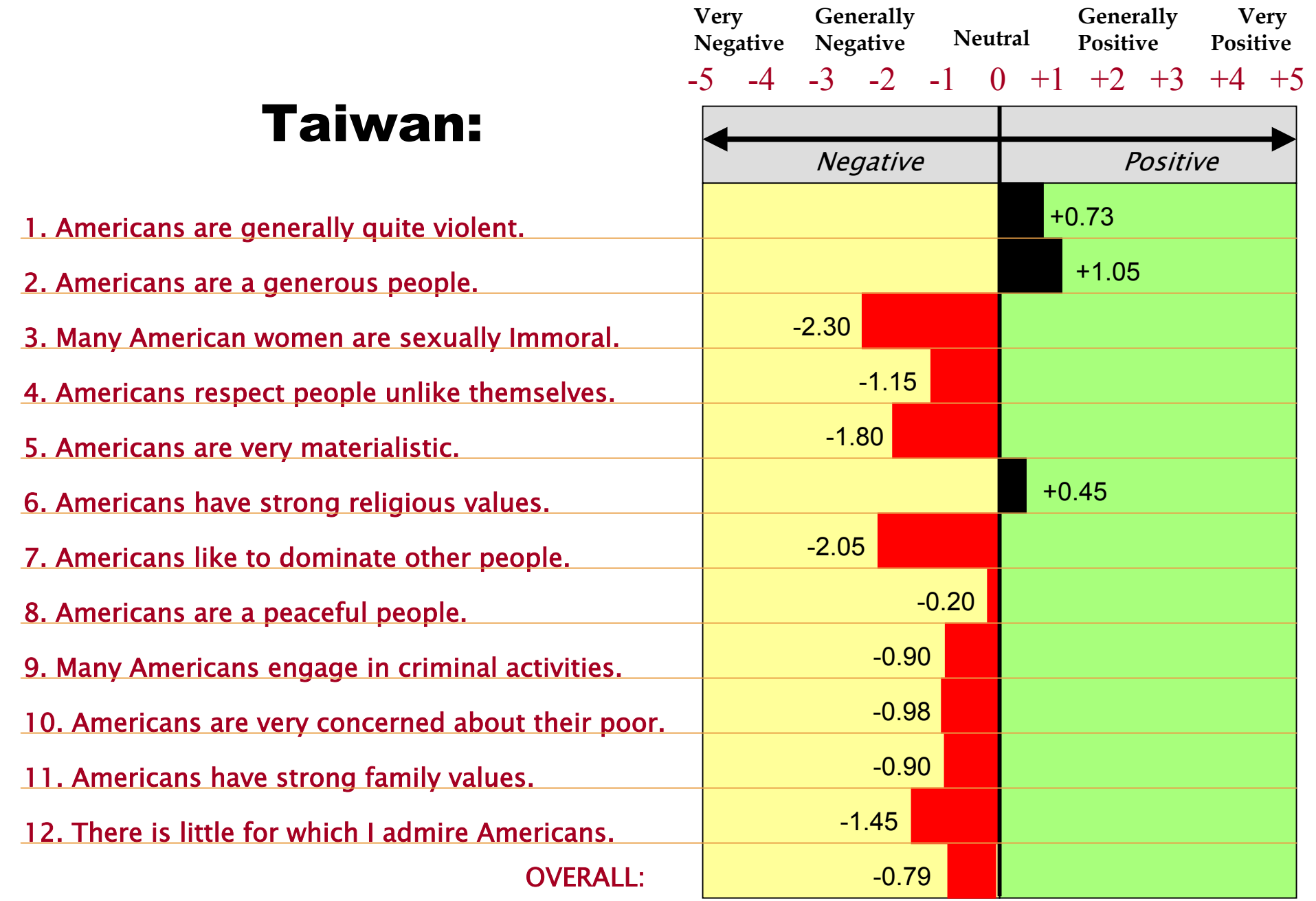

Figure 9: PROFILE OF SPECIFIC BELIEFS ABOUT AMERICANS

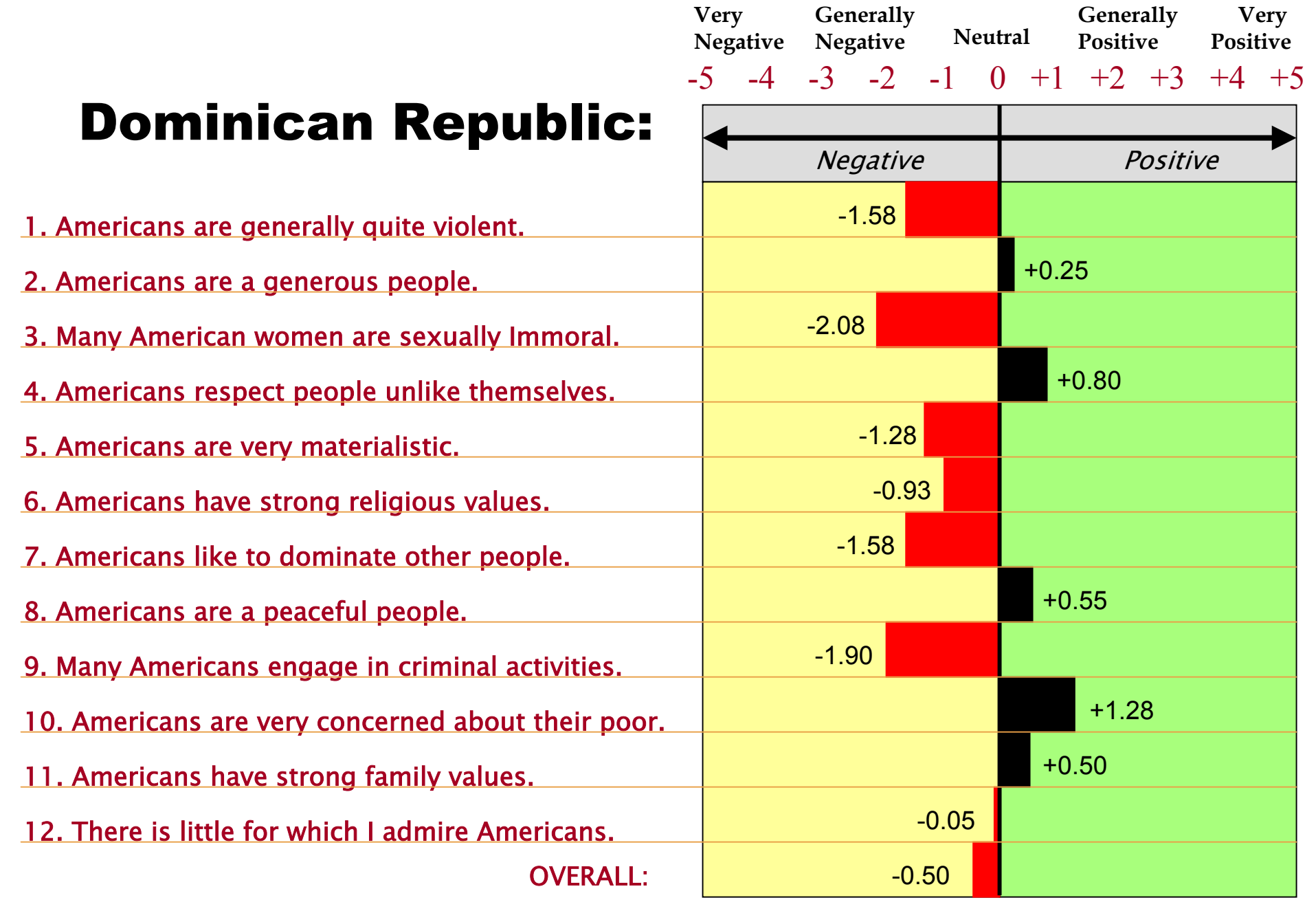

Figure 10: PROFILE OF SPECIFIC BELIEFS ABOUT AMERICANS

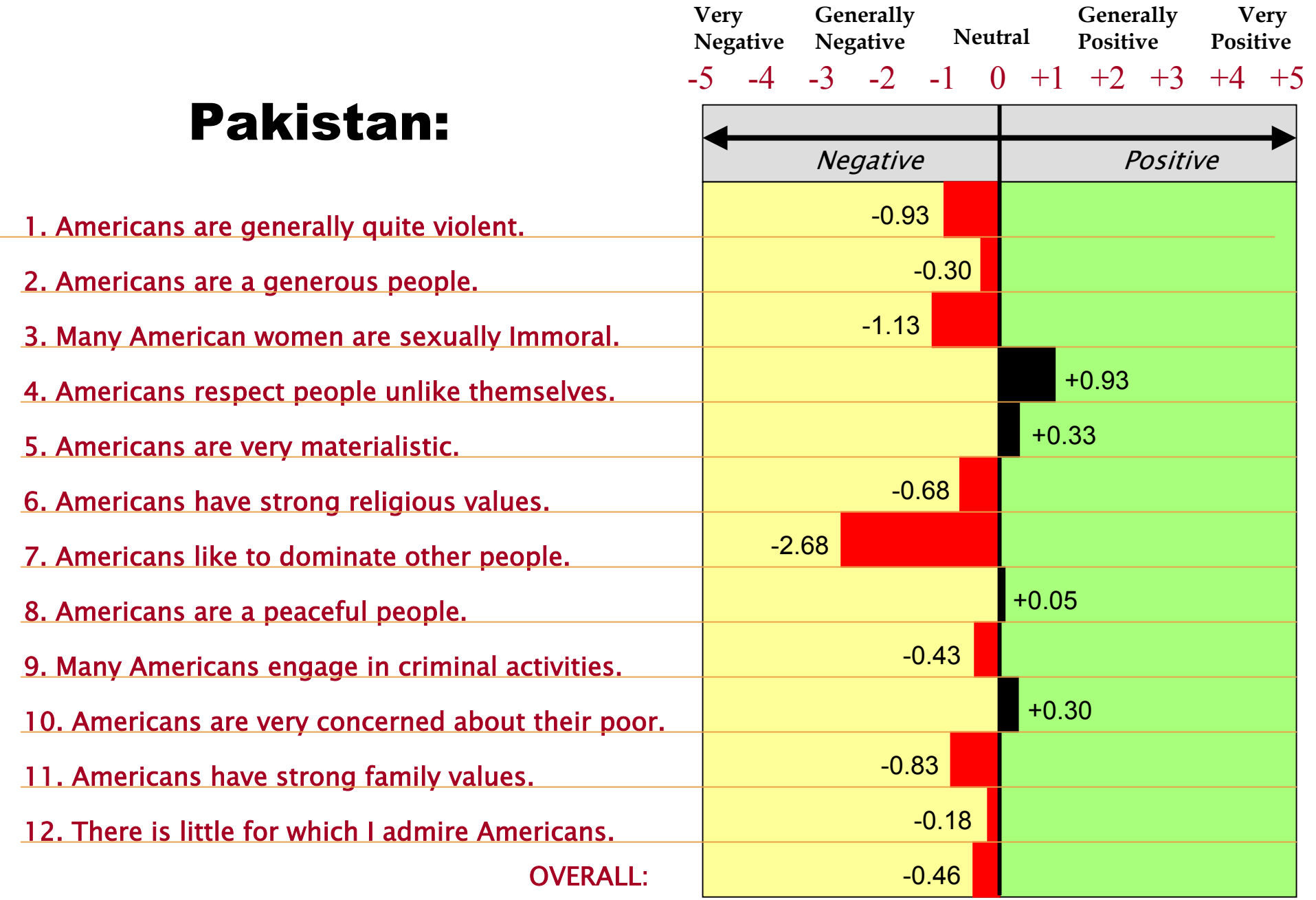

Figure 11: PROFILE OF SPECIFIC BELIEFS ABOUT AMERICANS

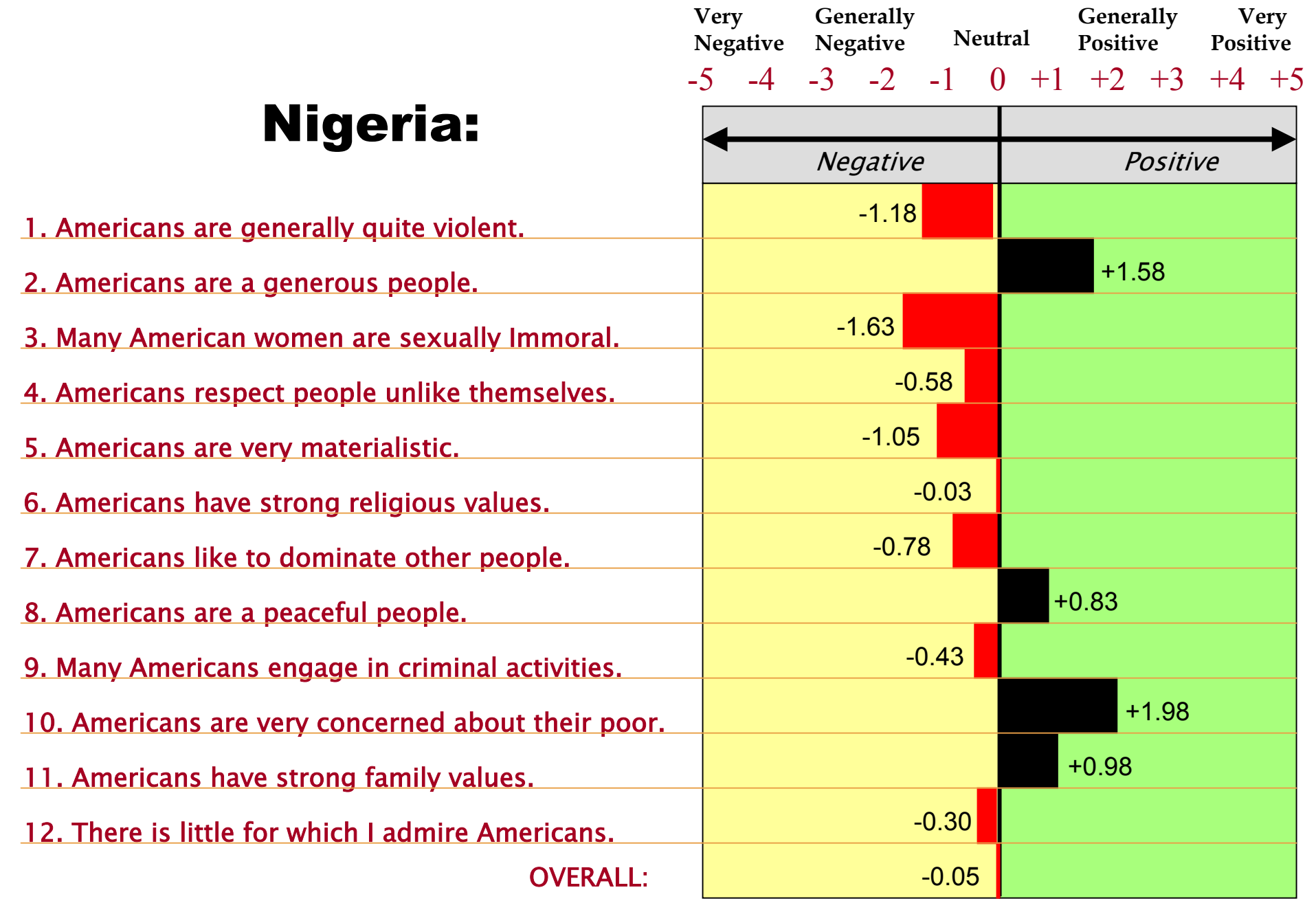

Figure 12: PROFILE OF SPECIFIC BELIEFS ABOUT AMERICANS

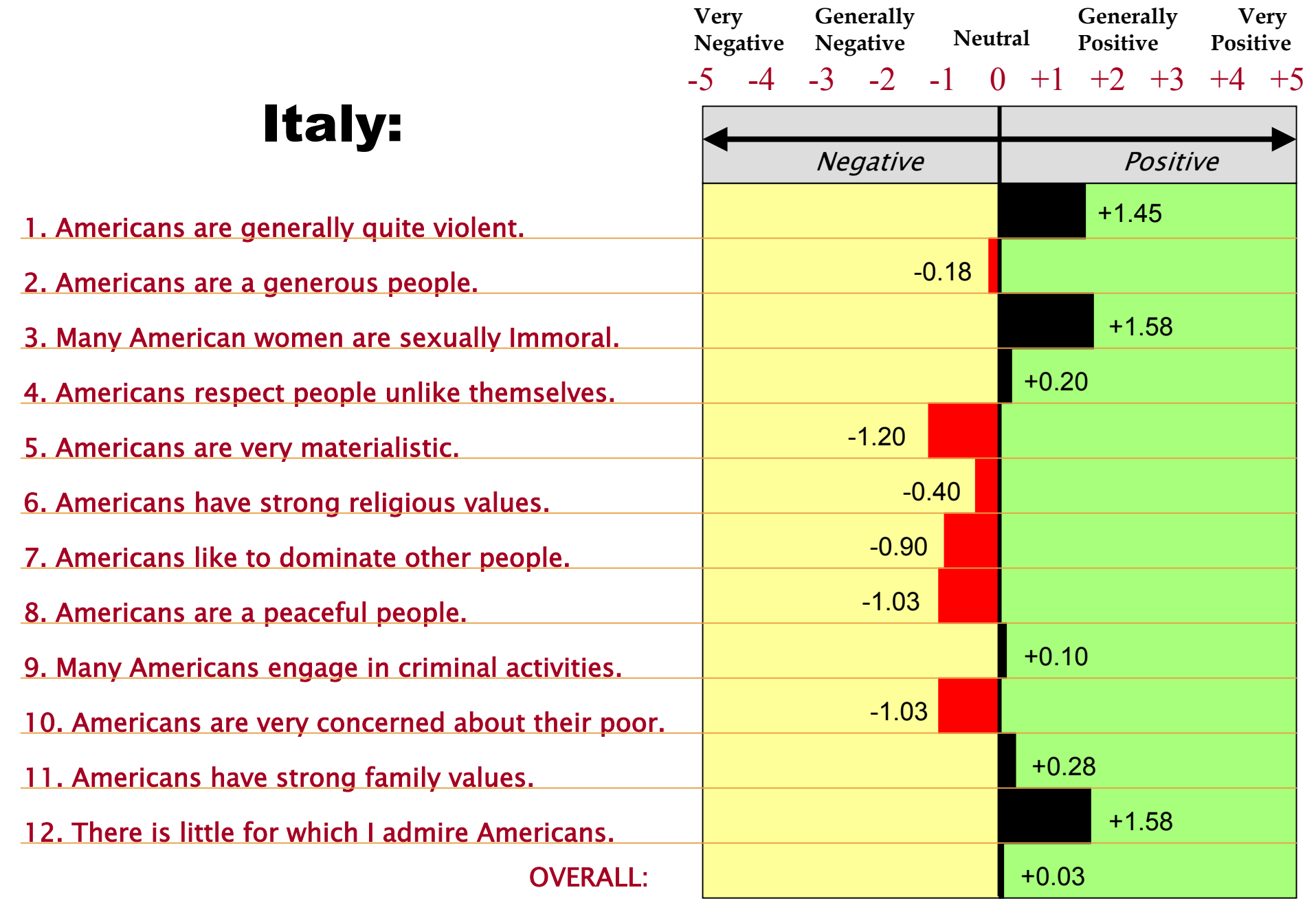

Figure 13: PROFILE OF SPECIFIC BELIEFS ABOUT AMERICANS

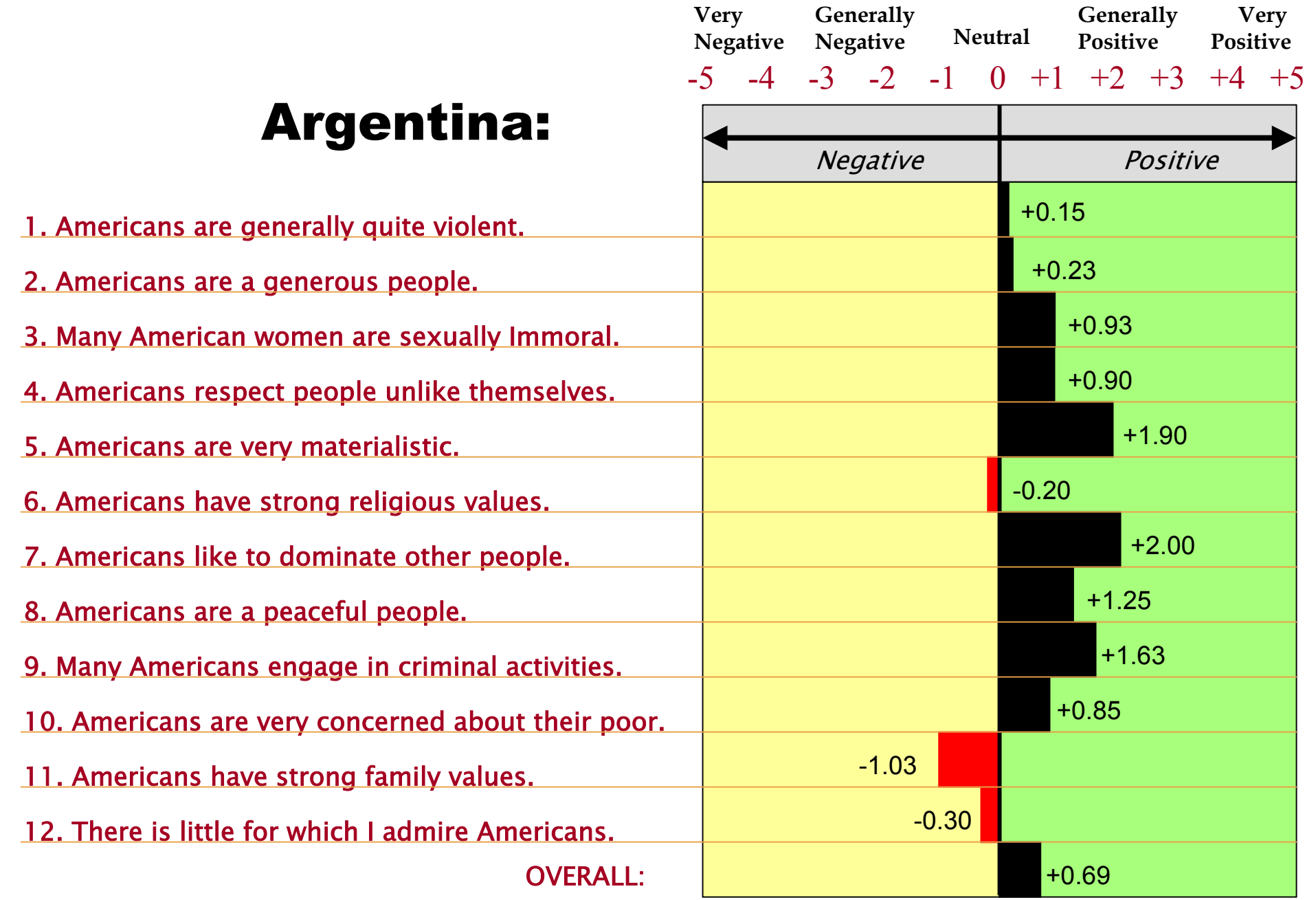

Figure X: PROFILE OF SPECIFIC BELIEFS ABOUT AMERICANS

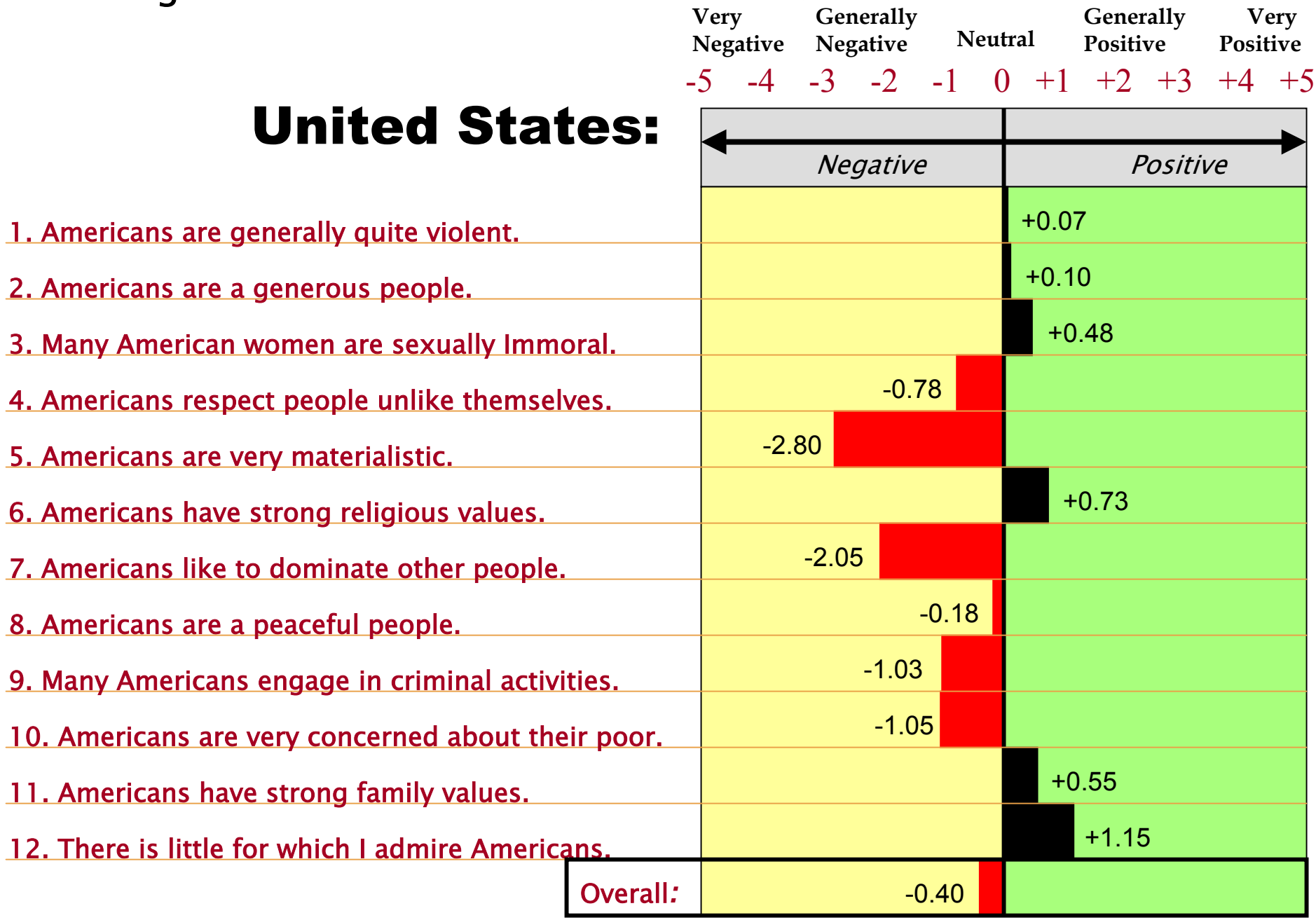

Figure 14: AMERICANS ARE GENERALLY QUITE VIOLENT

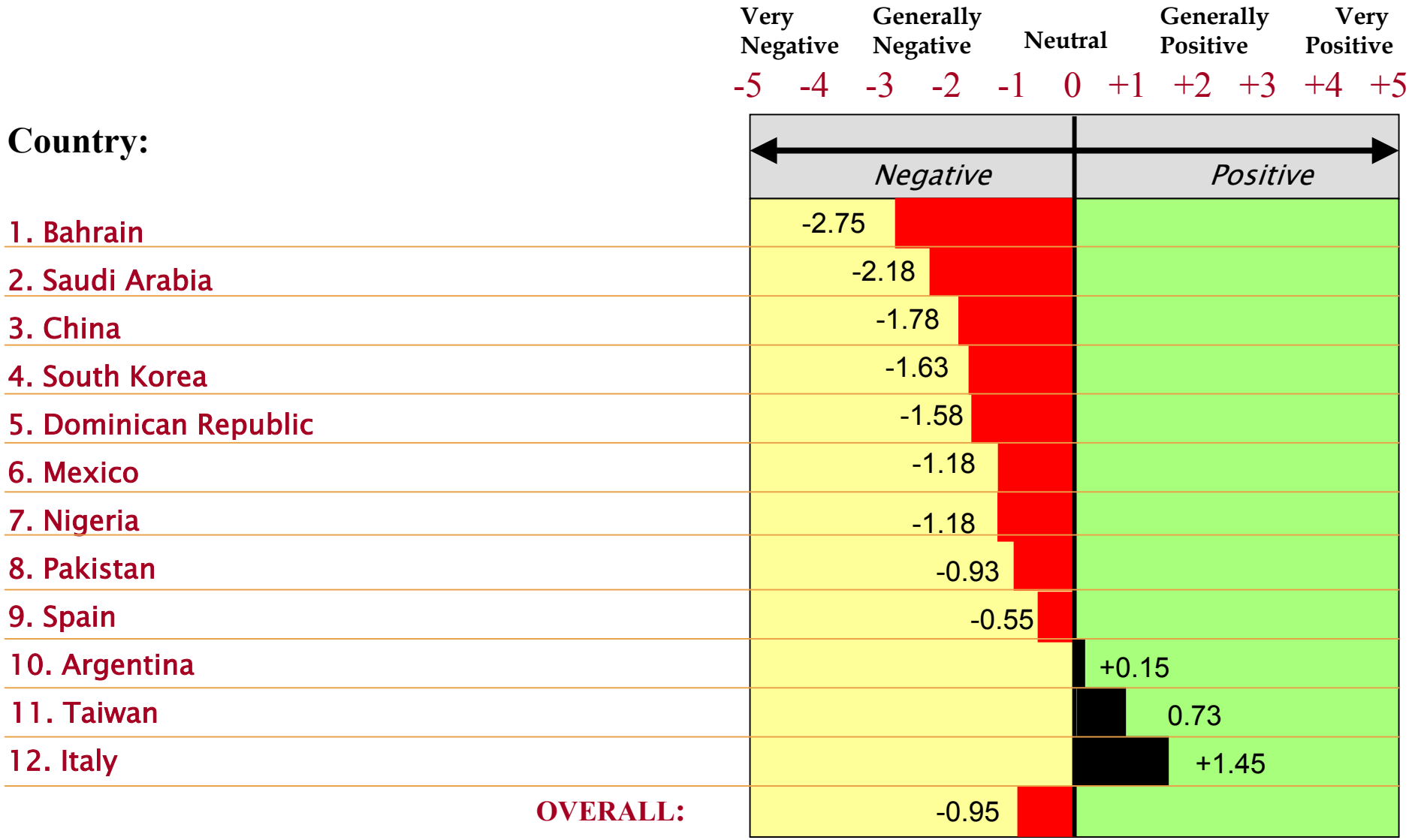

Figure 15: AMERICANS ARE A GENEROUS PEOPLE

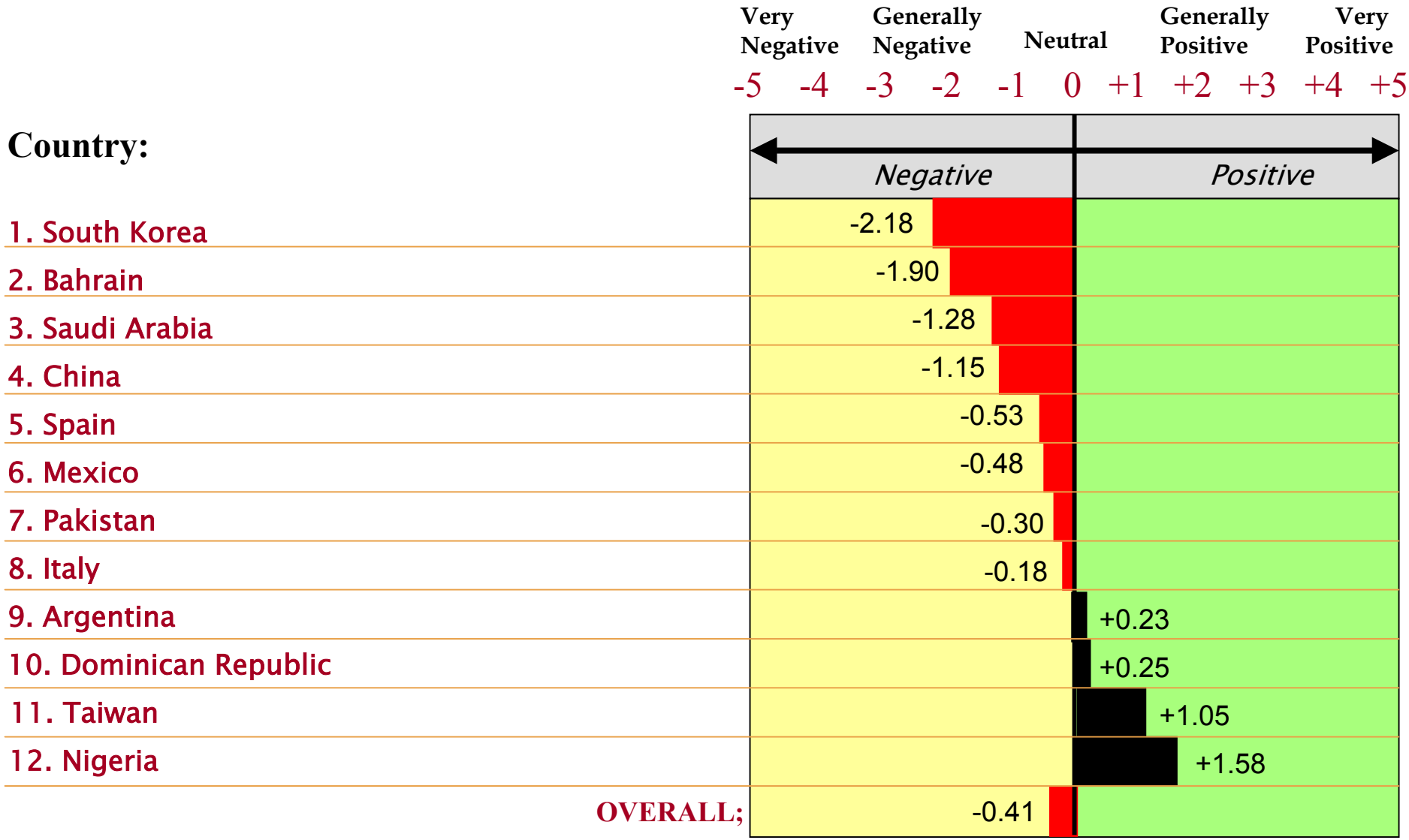

Figure 16: MANY AMERICAN WOMEN ARE SEXUALLY IMMORAL.

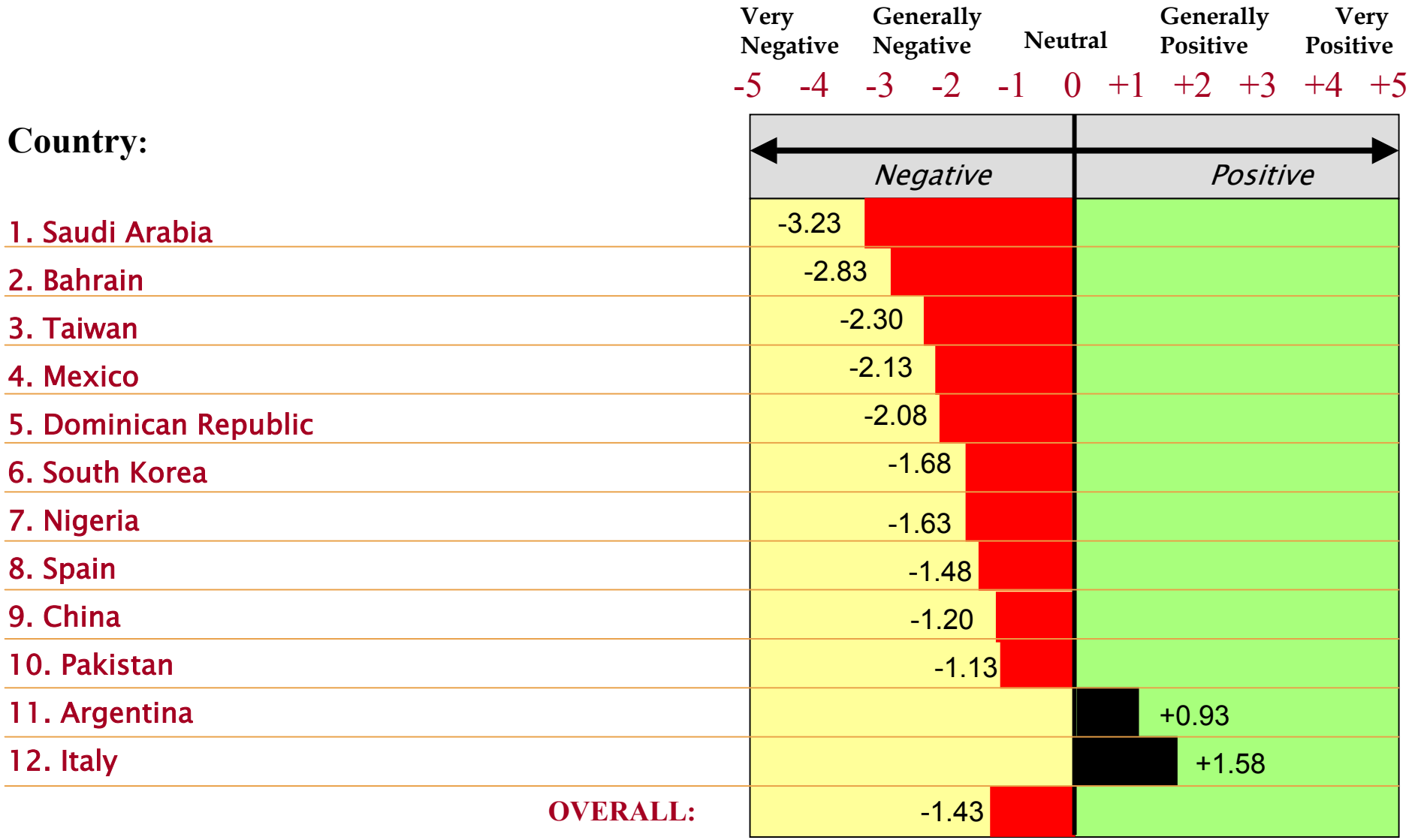

Figure 17: AMERICANS RESPECT PEOPLE UNLIKE THEMSELVES

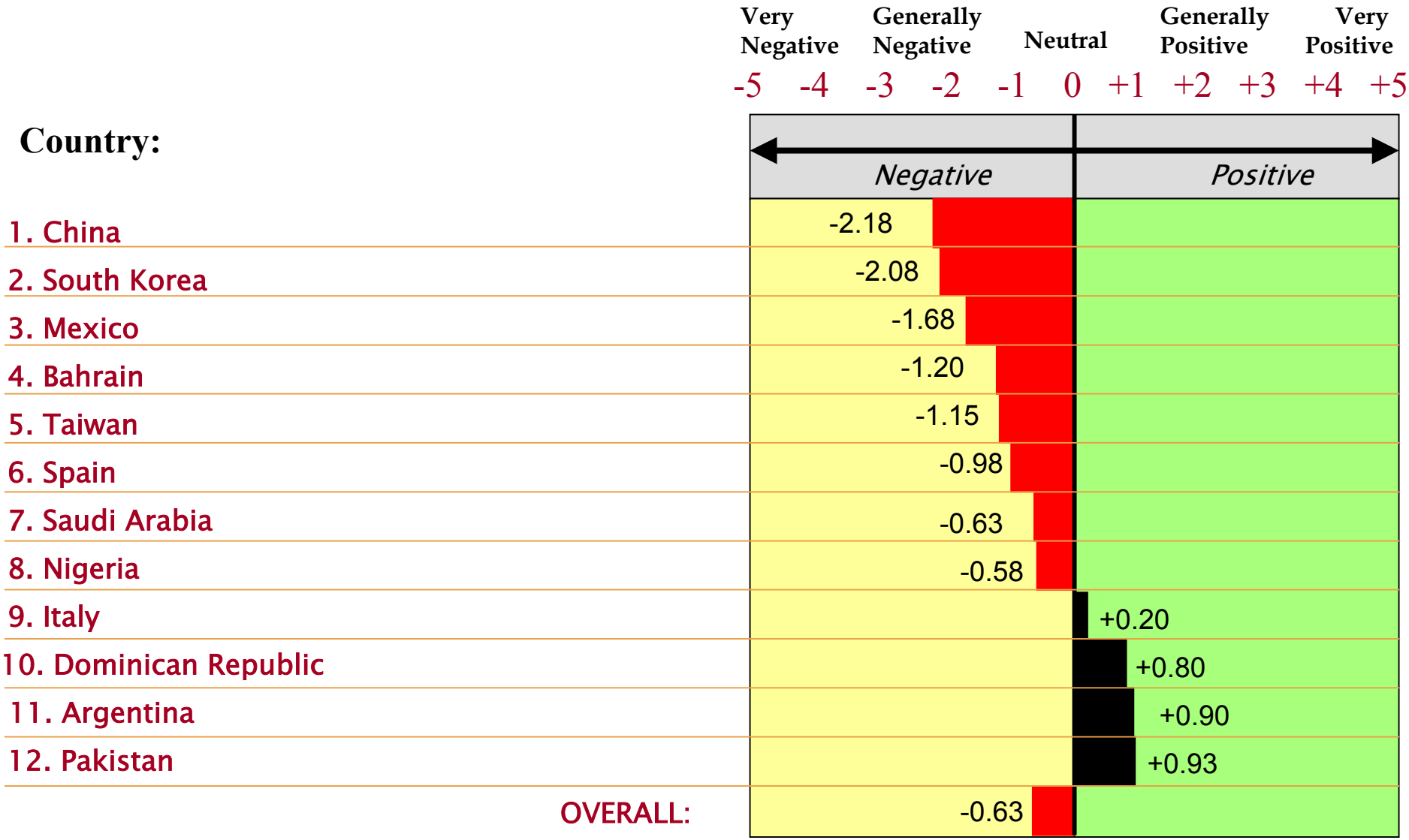

Figure 18: AMERICANS ARE VERY MATERIALISTIC

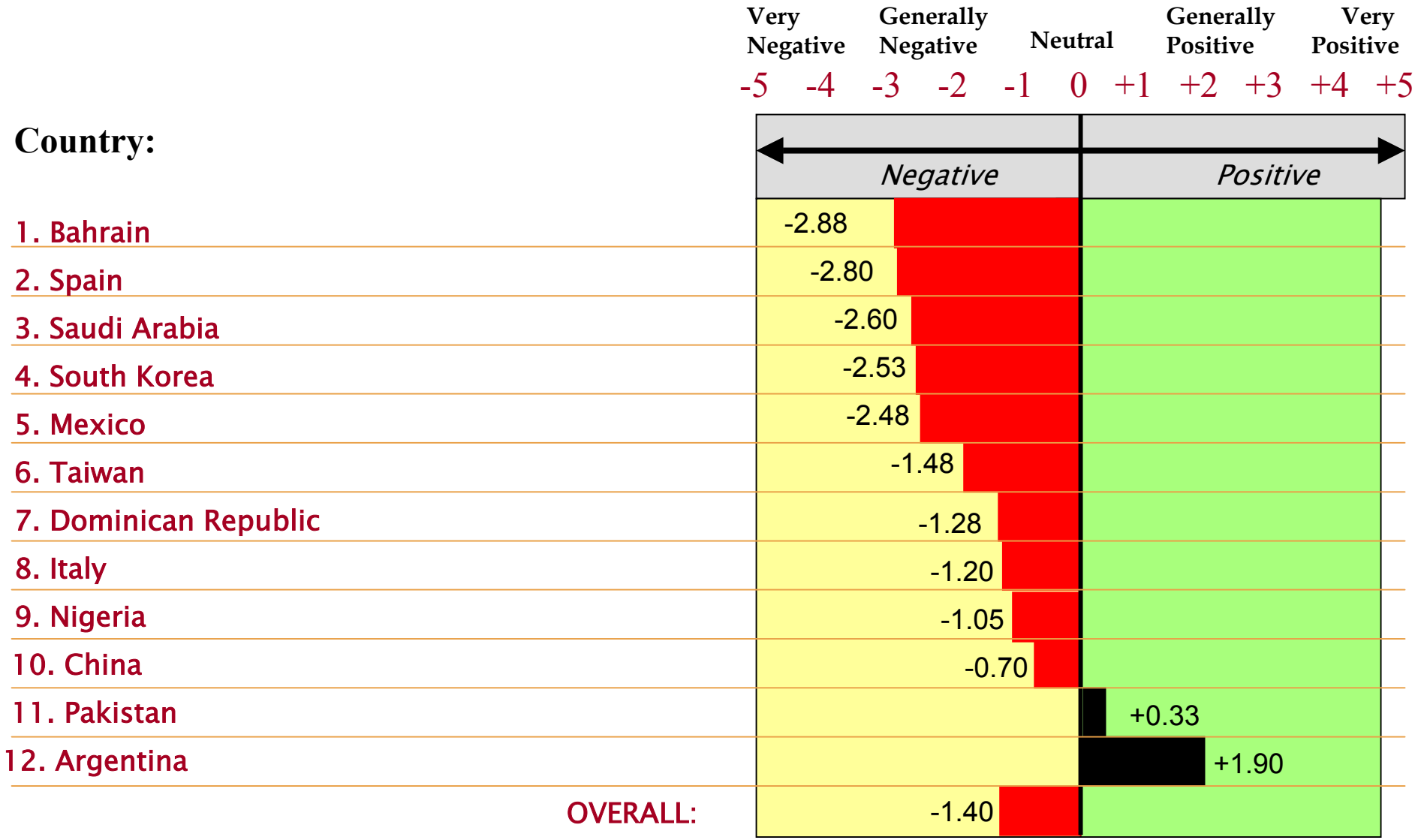

Figure 19: AMERICANS HAVE STRONG RELIGIOUS VALUES

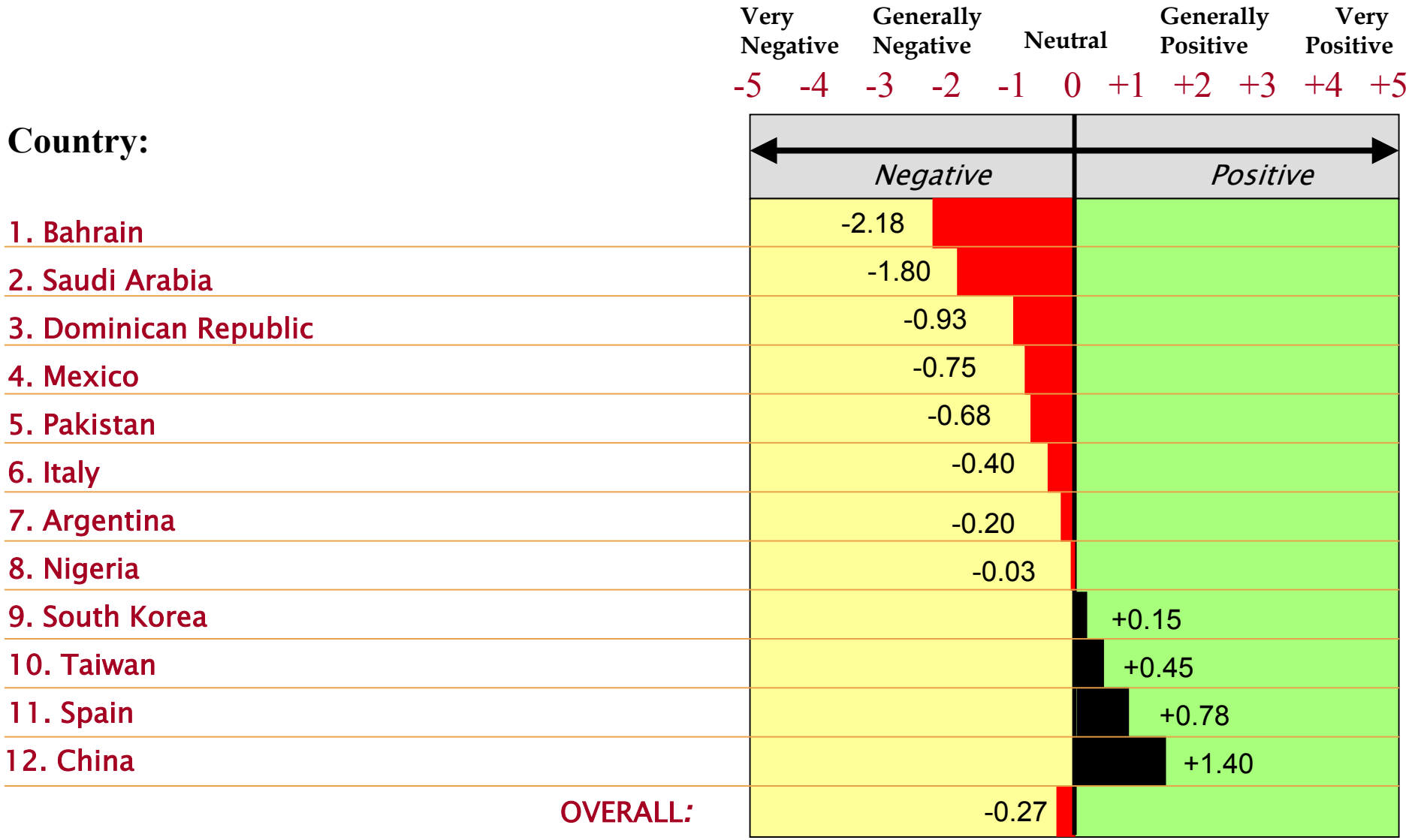

Figure 20: AMERICANS LIKE TO DOMINATE OTHER PEOPLE

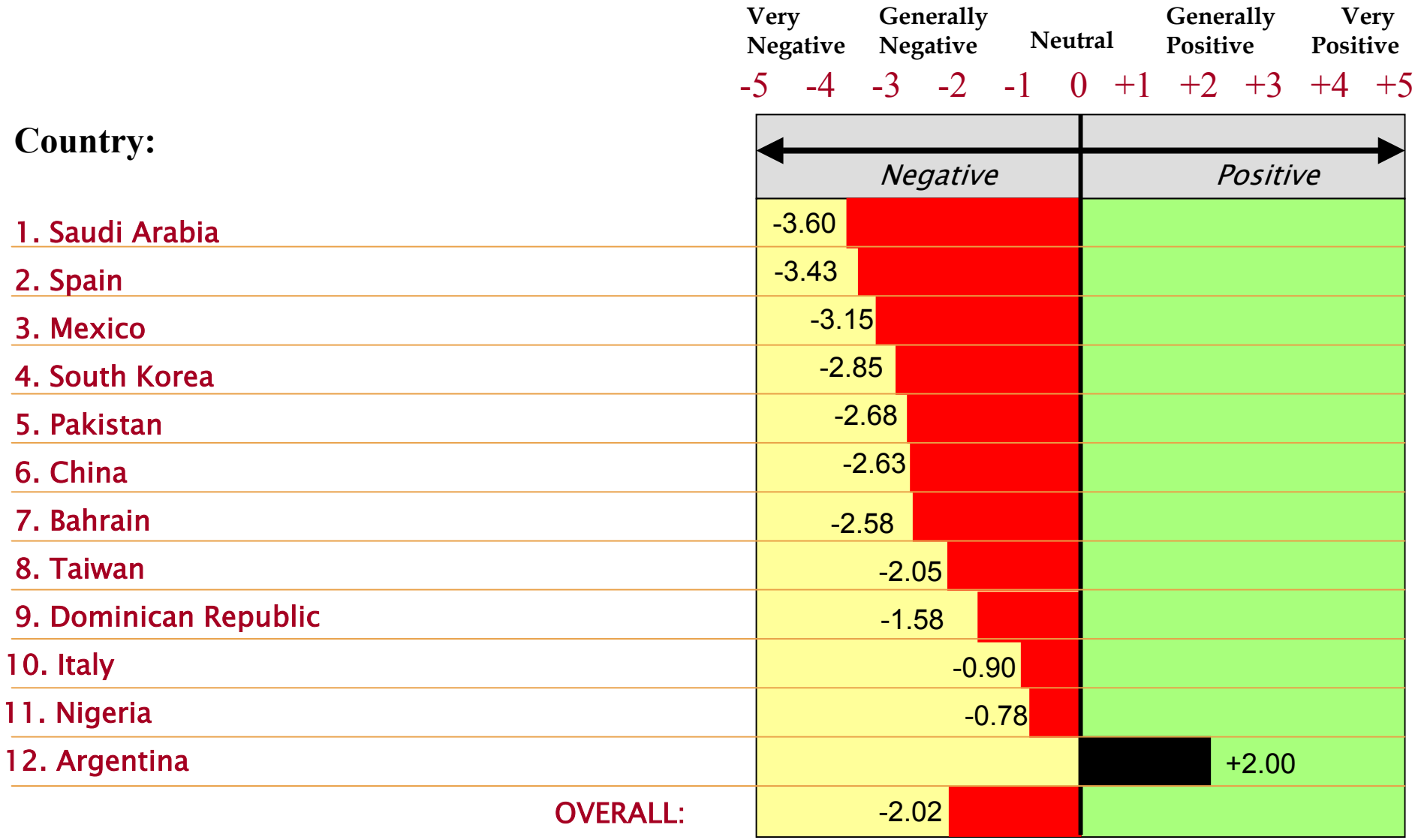

Figure 21: AMERICANS ARE A PEACEFUL PEOPLE

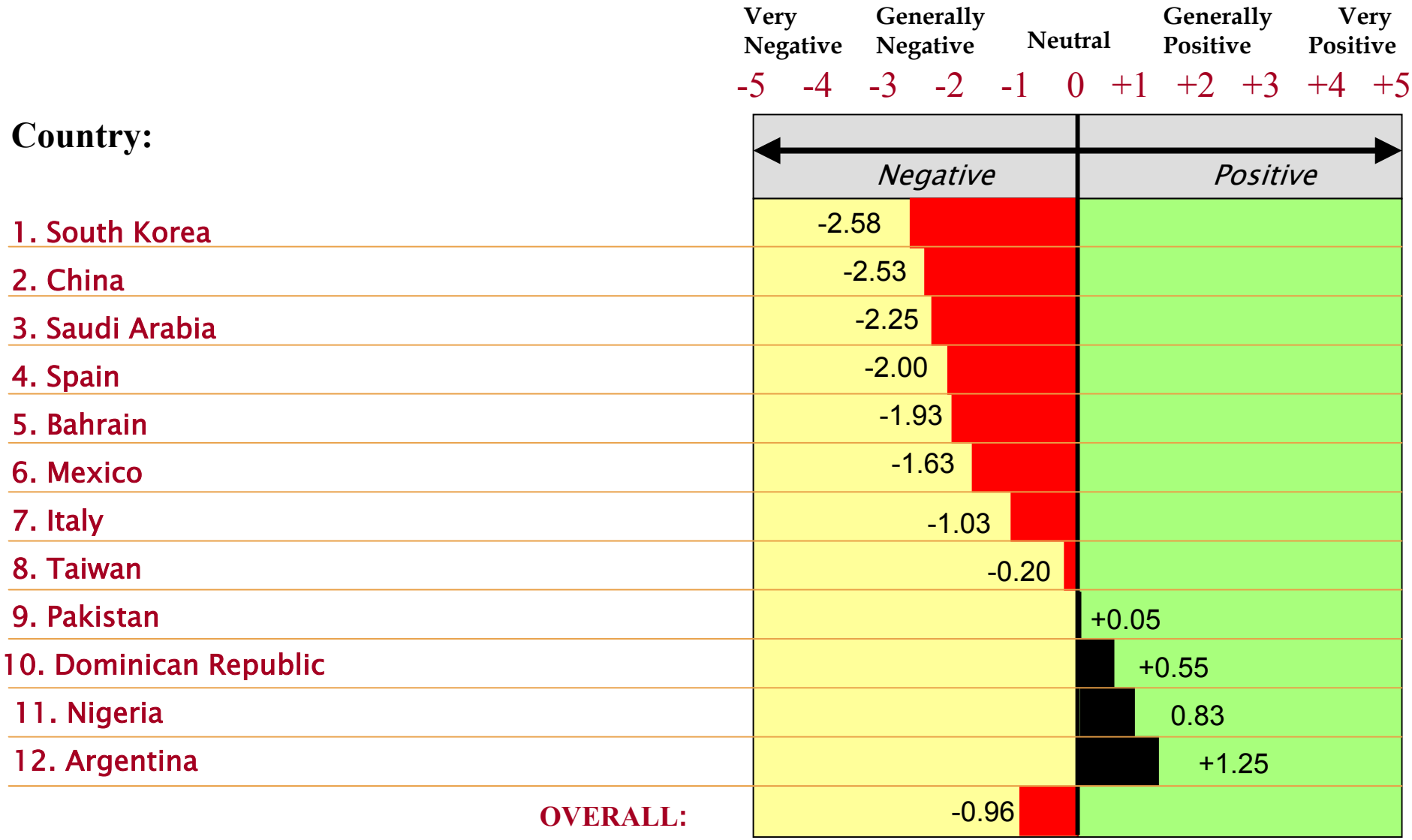

Figure 22: MANY AMERICANS ENGAGE IN CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES

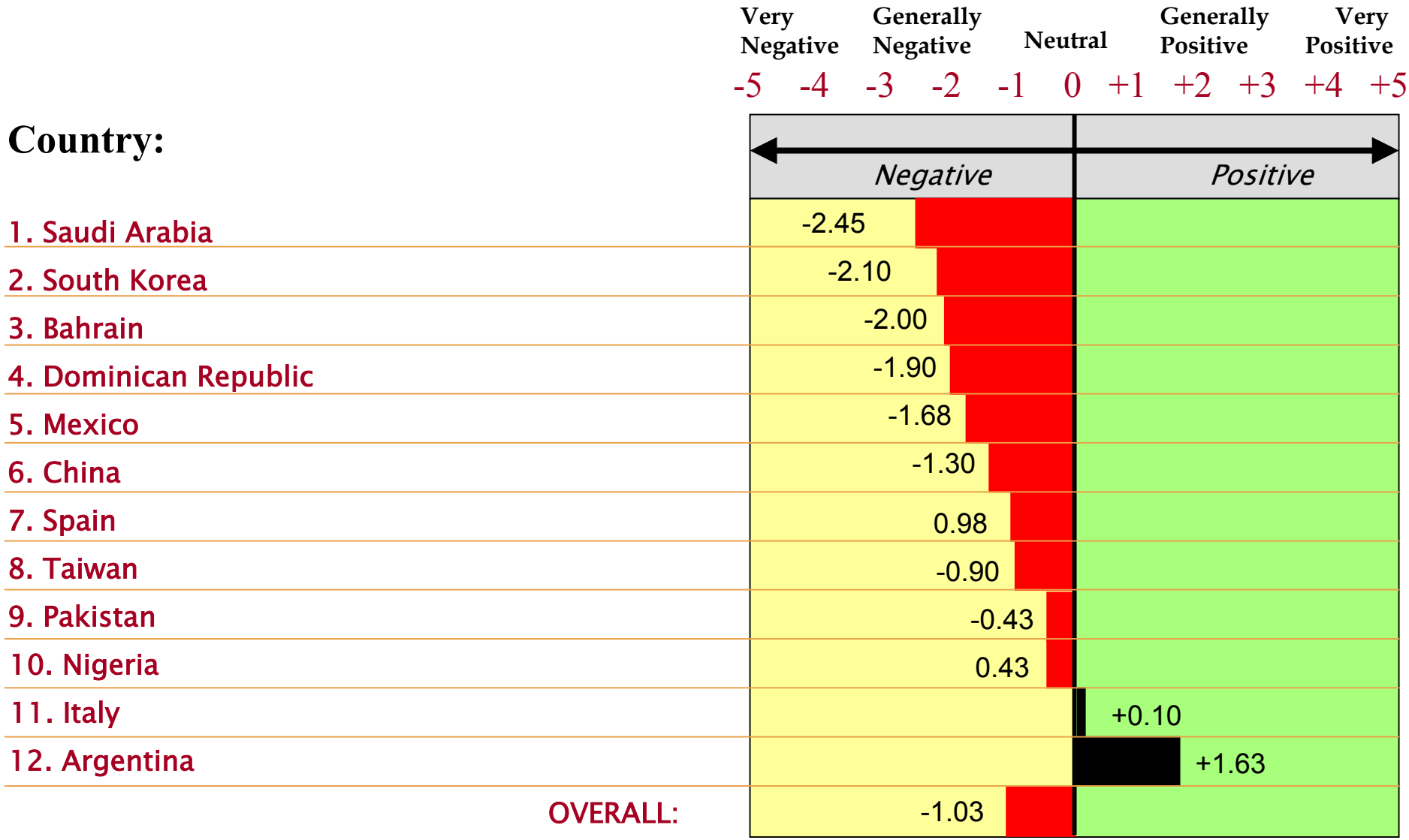

Figure 23: AMERICANS ARE VERY CONCERNED ABOUT THEIR POOR

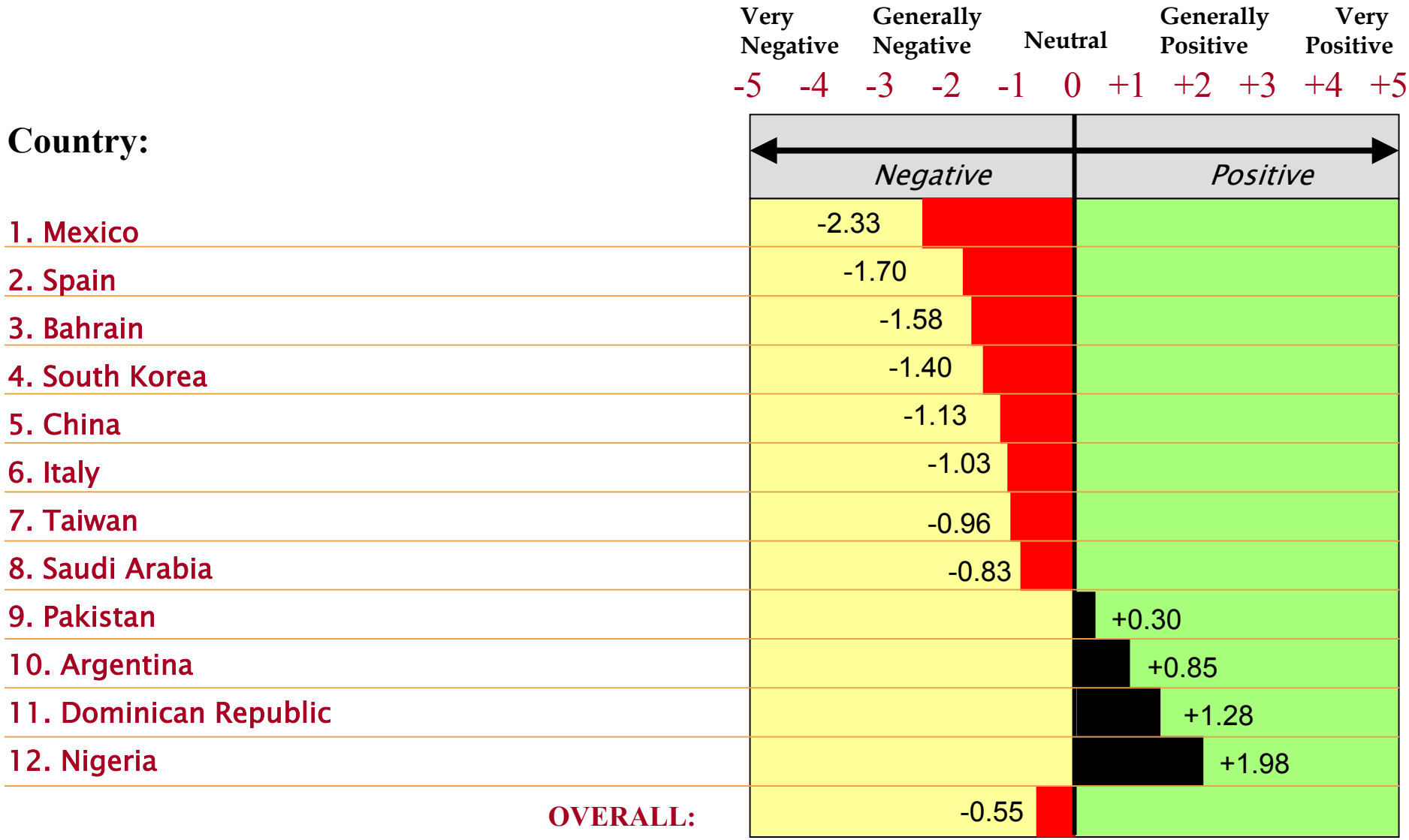

Figure 24: AMERICANS HAVE STRONG FAMILY VALUES

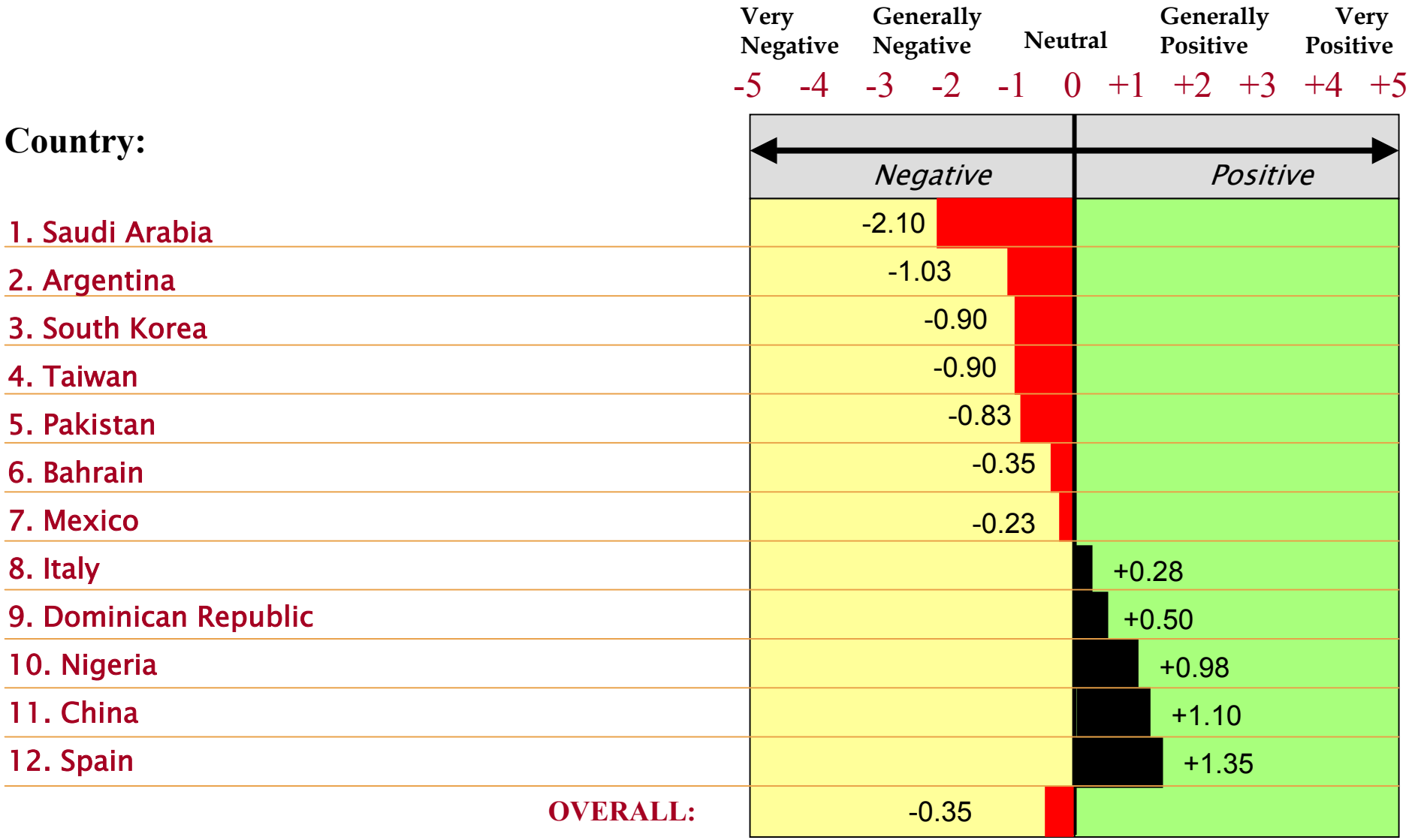

Figure 25: THERE IS LITTLE FOR WHICH I ADMIRE AMERICANS

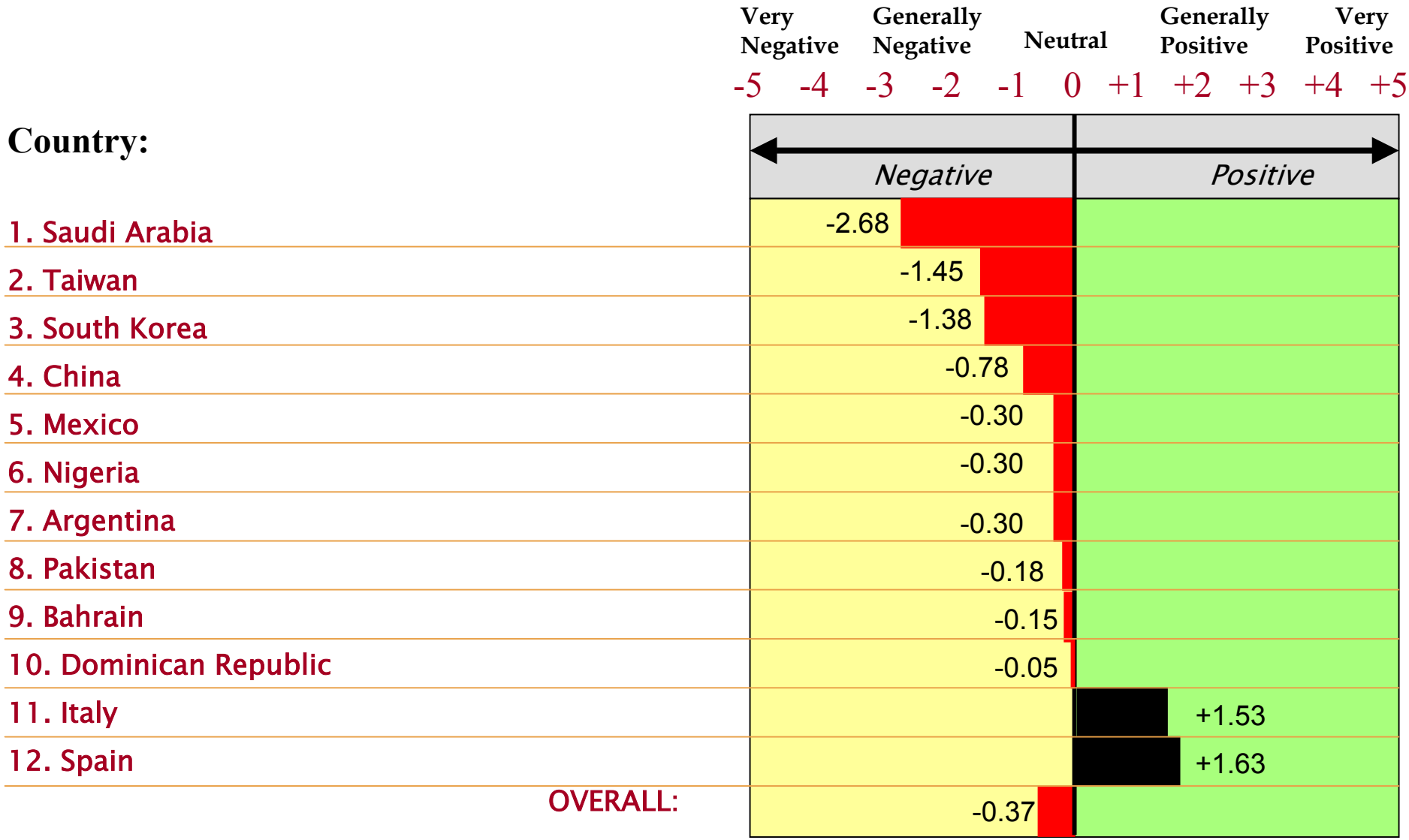

Figure 26: SUBSCALE: INFLUENCES OF MASS MEDIA DEPICTIONS

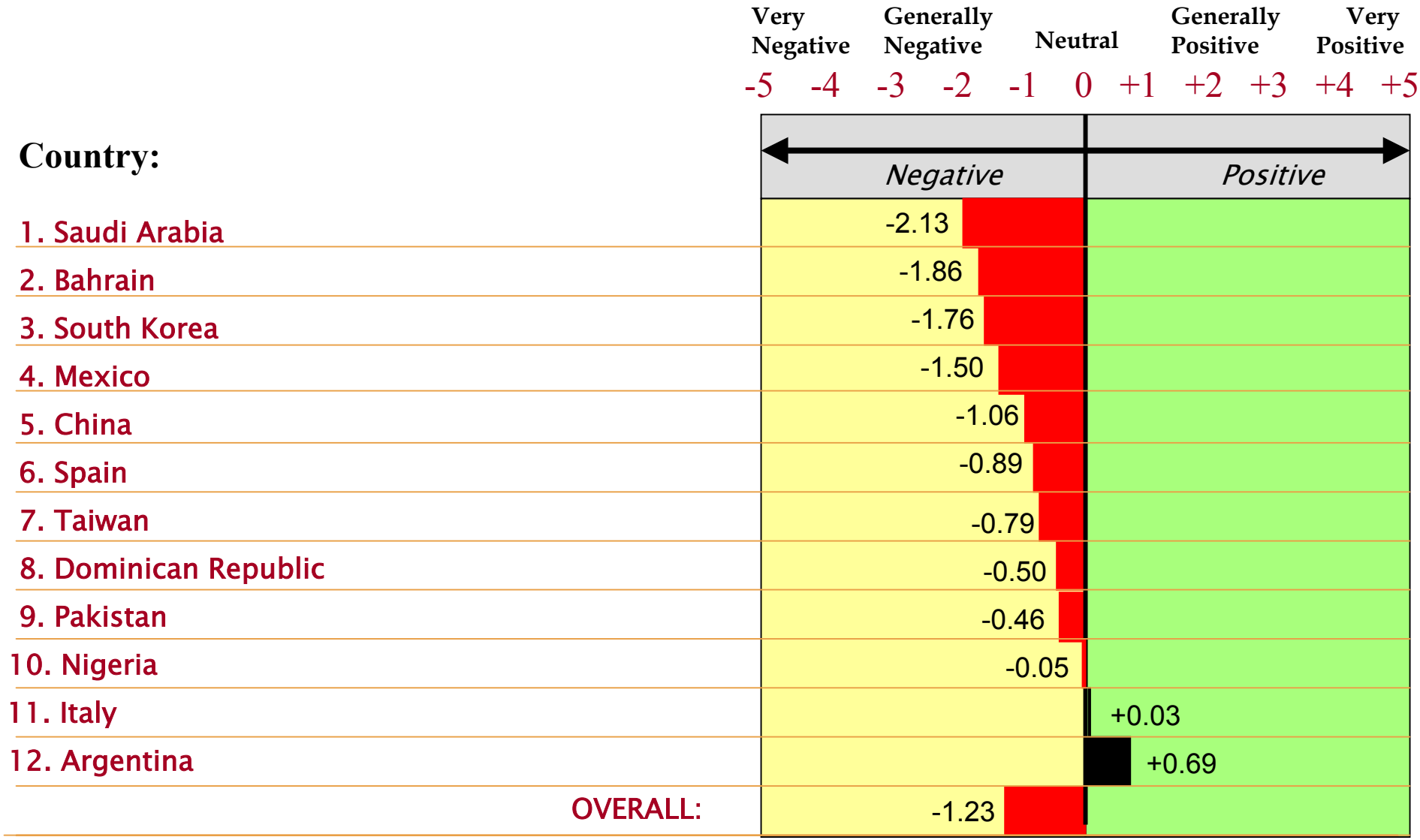

Figure 27: SUBSCALE: AMERICANS AS CULTURAL IMPERIALISTS

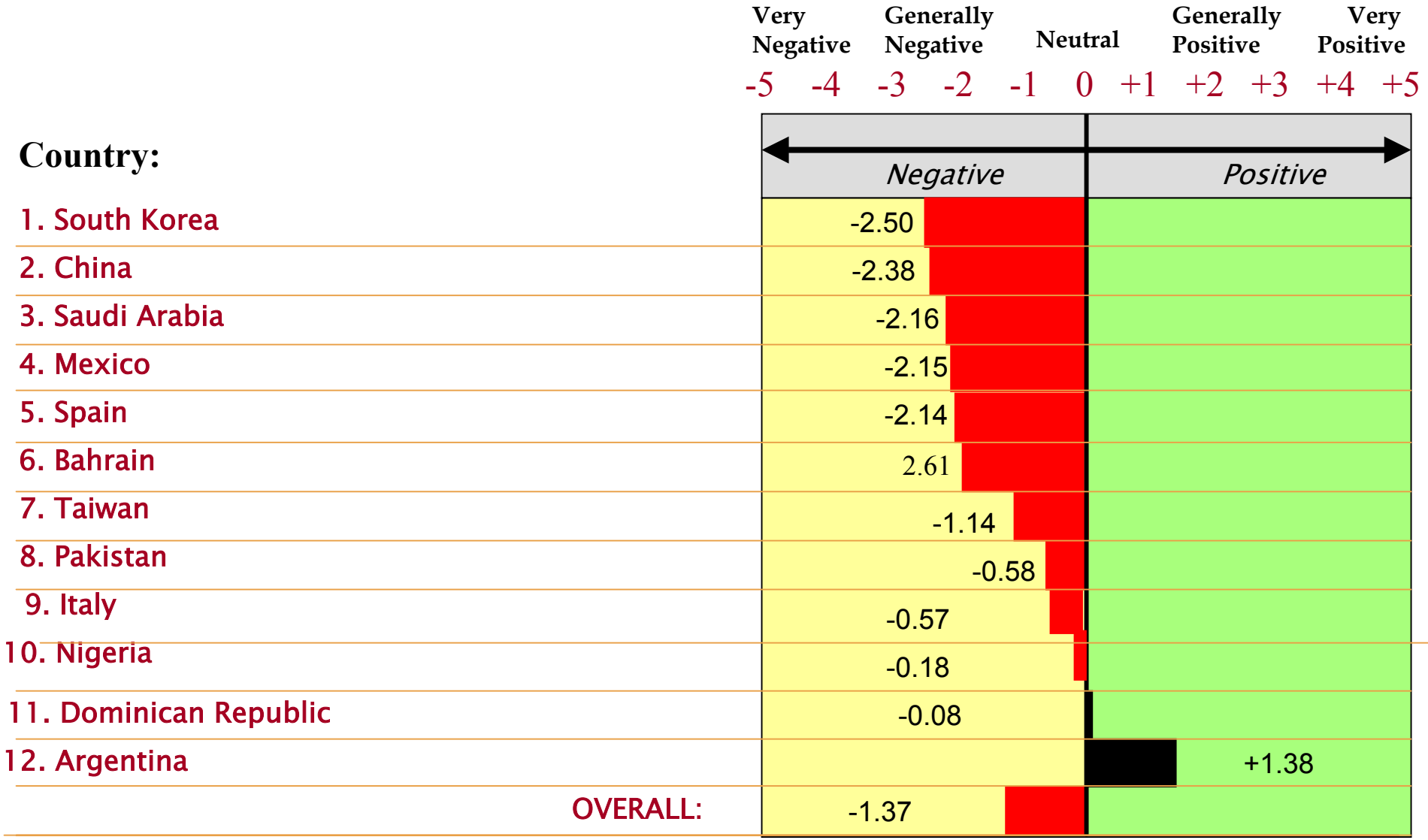

Figure 28: SUBSCALE: AMERICANS HAVE HUMANITARIAN VALUES