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Attributions, False Consensus, and Valence: Two Field Studies

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Evidence from two studies demonstrates that observers tend to perceive a false consensus with respect to the relative commonness of their own behavioral choices. This phenomenon was replicated across a variety of behaviors. This bias was not related, however, to subjects' trait inferences of the typical person who would choose a particular alternative. Neither estimated commonness of responses nor subjects' own behavioral choice provided an adequate explanation of the obtained differences in attributional inferences. Results of the two studies show that people make more extreme and confident trait ratings about evaluatively positive behavior, irrespective of their own behavioral choice. Subjects' trait ratings were in accordance with Ross's (1977) proposal (i.e., more extreme ratings about dissimilar others) *only* when subjects rated their own behavioral choice relatively *unfavorably* compared with the behavioral alternative. Implications of these findings for previous investigations dealing with the false consensus effect are outlined. Finally, evaluative and motivational mechanisms are proposed that should be included in research on social inference and attributional processes.

Beliefs held by individuals about the beliefs of the generalized "other" have been investigated since the mid-1930s (e.g., Hayes, 1936; Thomson, 1941; Travers, 1941; Wallen, 1941, 1943). Results of these studies suggest that people operate within a "false" social world, or at least one quite different from that observed by the social scientist. Fields and Schuman (1976) extended these findings and showed that people tend to believe that others think the same as oneself. More recently, Hansen and Donoghue (1977) and Ross, Greene, and House (1977) studied this phenomenon in the context of attribution theory. Ross et al. demonstrated that people tend to perceive a "false consensus" with respect to the relative commonness of their own responses. Furthermore, they related this perceptual bias to attributional processes. Their findings showed that people estimated particular responses to be relatively common and relatively unrevealing concerning the actor's distinguishing

personal dispositions when the responses in question were similar to their own responses; by contrast, responses differing from one's own responses were perceived to be relatively uncommon and revealing of the person displaying that specific behavior. More tentatively, Ross et al. related their findings to Jones and Nisbett's (1971) divergent-perspectives hypothesis, that is, that people tend to explain their own behavior in more situational terms, whereas as observers they explain the behavior of other actors as the product of personal dispositions. Ross et al. (1977) suggested that people's perceived consensus partly determines the causal attributions of the behavior in question. This suggestion is in accordance with the theoretical proposals by Jones and Davis (1965) and Kelly (1967) that atypical, counternormative, or unexpected responses in a given situation lead to more dispositional inferences about the actor than relatively common responses. Empirical support for this proposal was provided by Jones and Harris (1967) and McArthur (1972).

A number of studies attempted to investigate the relation between consensus and attributional processes. Some of these provided subjects with consensus information (*sample-based consensus*), others focused on the effects of subjects' perception of consensus (*self-based consensus*). Generally, the studies that provided

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scales, and to evaluate the different behavioral options. One important difference with the Ross et al. study is that we focused on *self-generated* behavior, that is, behavior that requires individual effort and is not the result of a request made by the experimenter or his or her confederate. As a consequence, one would expect dispositional factors to be of more importance in our studies than in those reported by Ross et al.

Study 1

Both Studies 1 and 2 were part of a larger scale investigation of people's attitudes, knowledge, and behavior with regard to a number of environmental issues (e.g., the use of detergents and energy conservation).

Method

Study 1 presented subjects with questionnaires containing four pairs of behavior related to the above mentioned issues. Each pair contained one "conservationist" behavioral alternative and one relatively "nonconservationist." A total of 837 subjects participated in Study 1. All respondents were approached individually (at home) by a team of female interviewers. The respondents interviewed were those who (a) were responsible for running the household and (b) owned a washing machine and did their laundry at home. As a consequence, only a small proportion of males (less than 8%) was included. The four pairs of behavioral alternatives presented to subjects were

- washing laundry, whites, at 90 °C (60 °C);
- using (no-) phosphate laundry detergents;
- (not) including a prewash; and
- using a high (low) number of rinses.

Subjects were asked to rate a person who would choose a particular option for each of the four pairs of alternatives. These ratings were made with respect to four personal characteristics. Subjects were randomly split into two samples; for Sample A ($n = 414$), the relevant traits were cleanliness, thoughtfulness, practicality, and social concern. For each trait a 100-mm rating scale was used; the two extremes of the four rating scales were labeled as follows: *unhygienic-hygienic*, *thoughtful-thoughtless*, *impractical-practical*, and *socially concerned-socially unconcerned*. The four scales were selected so that both alternatives of a specific behavioral pair could be just as easily described in a favorable way as in an unfavorable way. In this way we attempted to provide an evaluatively balanced set of scales in order to prevent the possible confounding of trait ratings and evaluation. In order to test whether a different set of scales would result in the same findings, subjects in Sample B ($n = 423$) were presented with four different scales. The relevant traits were realism, cleanliness, environmental concern, and responsibility. The four (evaluatively balanced) scales were labeled as follows: *unrealistic-realistic*, *clean-dirty*, *environment-conscious-non-environment-conscious*, and *irresponsible-responsible*.

After completing the relevant trait ratings, subjects were

asked to state their own choice regarding each of the four behavioral pairs on a 5-point scale ranging from *always choose* (1) to *never choose* (5); the intermediate categories were *usually choose*, *sometimes choose*, and *usually do not choose*. This question was followed by a request to estimate the percentage of housekeepers in The Netherlands who would choose each particular alternative (the two alternatives of each pair added up to 100%).

Finally, subjects were asked to indicate which of each pair of alternatives they thought to be better. The answer to this question was given on a 5-point scale; the two alternatives were printed at the extremes of the scale. The response categories, scored from +2 to -2, were: Option A is *much better*, *better*, *equally good*, *worse*, or *much worse* than Option B.

Results

Preliminary analyses were performed to investigate whether the two samples differed from one another in trait ratings and perceived consensus due to the use of different trait-rating scales. These analyses showed no effect due to rating scales. In the analyses below, therefore, this factor is ignored.

Perception of consensus. The results presented in Table 1 provide strong support for the hypothesis that people who choose a particular response will rate that response as more probable for "people in general" than will subjects who choose the alternative response. The effect of subjects' own behavioral choice on their estimates of commonness was statistically significant for all four pairs of behavioral alternatives. The effect of subjects' own choice was tested in an analysis of variance (ANOVA) with the estimated commonness of each of the behavioral options as a dependent variable. Subjects were split into two groups, people who always or usually prefer Option A and people who always or usually prefer Option B. The middle category (people who sometimes choose Option A, sometimes Option B) was less relevant to the present hypotheses and excluded from the analysis. As a consequence, the ANOVAs for the four behaviors were based on different numbers of subjects. Thus, for the first item (washing temperature) we compared the estimated commonness of Option A for the two groups (44.8 vs. 30.8). Because the estimated commonness of Option B equals the difference between the estimated commonness of Option A and 100, the F test for the 44.8 versus 30.8 difference is identical to that for 55.2 versus 69.2. Thus, the F values presented in Table 1 refer to both differences. Results

pronounced differences in their trait profiles attributed to the two groups. The typical person choosing the conservationist option was described in extremely favorable terms: All attributions were clearly positive (thoughtful, responsible, etc.). The person opting for the nonconservationist option was favorably described in terms of cleanliness only; all other attributions were relatively negative in evaluative terms. The nonconservationist group's mean scores, on the other hand, were located more in the middle regions of the trait scales; the exception was their ratings in terms of hygiene and cleanliness. Attributions to the person opting for the nonconservationist option were generally more favorable (i.e., more hygienic, realistic, and practical), but the differences in the *content* of the traits attributed to the two groups were less marked than those obtained for the subjects choosing the conservationist options.

The effect of valence. To test the effects of the participants' evaluations of their own and the alternative behavioral choice, we conducted two analyses. The first focuses on the within-group effects (unlike the *F* ratios presented in Table 2, which combined the within-group effects and the between-group effects) and provides information concerning subjects' evaluations of the various behavioral alternatives. The second analysis tests whether subjects' own behavioral preference exerted an influence on their trait ratings beyond the effects of valence.

Table 2 shows the results of eight paired comparisons of the trait ratings of each of the groups for the four behavior pairs and subjects' evaluation of the behavioral alternatives. The latter score is based on a question asking subjects to indicate how much better they thought Option A to be as compared with Option B, for each of the behavioral items. Results indicate that in six of the eight cases subjects made more extreme trait ratings when describing a person who chooses their own preferred behavioral alternative. In five of these six cases this effect reached statistical significance. Of the remaining two cases, one did not show a significant difference, whereas the subjects opting for the use of phosphate detergents showed a highly significant difference in the opposite direction. These subjects make more extreme trait inferences about the typical

Table 2
Trait Inferences About Personal Dispositions of Actors Behaving Like or Unlike Self and Evaluation of Behavioral Alternatives (Study 1)

Behavioral option	Own choice	n	Option A		Option B		Difference		Interaction <i>F</i>	Paired <i>t</i> test	Evaluation	
			<i>M</i> ^a	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i> ^b	<i>SD</i>			<i>M</i> ^c	<i>SD</i>
Washing temperature	(A) 60 °C	344	139.5	41.5	117.6	46.4	+21.9	52.2	106.7****	8.7****	+0.3	0.8
	(B) 90 °C	343	98.5	48.6	115.7	48.0	-17.2	46.7				
Detergent use	(A) no phosphate	142	148.1	37.5	105.3	45.3	+42.8	41.9	3.2*	12.2****	+0.5	1.4
	(B) phosphate	544	117.7	54.5	83.9	55.9	+33.8	56.6				
Prewash	(A) no prewash	408	118.2	55.8	113.7	51.1	+4.5	48.4	4.4**	1.9*	+0.6	0.8
	(B) prewash	178	100.8	53.6	105.4	53.1	-4.6	47.7				
No. of rinses	(A) low	128	132.7	48.2	120.6	49.1	+12.1	41.5	6.7***	3.3****	+1.0	0.8
	(B) high	505	94.9	52.8	94.0	56.5	+0.9	44.1				

^a Scores represent the sum of the extremities on the four rating scales. Larger numbers reflect more extreme trait inferences. ^b Positive scores reflect more extreme trait inferences for Option A than for Option B. ^c Positive scores reflect a more positive evaluation of Option A than of Option B; negative scores reflect the reverse (possible range from +2 to -2). All scores were significantly different from zero, except the score for subjects choosing to use phosphate detergents.

* $p < .075$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$. **** $p < .001$.

In order to provide a further test of the effects of evaluative factors on attributional inferences, we conducted a second experiment in which we attempted to separate the contribution of evaluative factors from subjects' own behavioral choice. However, before we proceed with the description of this study, it is necessary to provide some information on the social context in which the present studies were conducted.

Of the four behavioral items used in Study 1, the issue concerning the use of phosphate detergents has received widespread attention in the Dutch media. Although residential energy consumption received considerable attention since the energy crisis in 1973, the latter discussion focuses on home heating, because this constitutes approximately 70% of the energy bill of the average household. It is not surprising, therefore, that the item concerning the use of phosphate detergents was the only one in which subjects choosing the nonconservationist option rated their own behavior relatively neutral. The remaining items showed that both groups rated their own behavior relatively favorably. In the second experiment we concentrated on behavioral aspects of home heating. In the light of the fact that this issue has been in the focus of public attention since 1973 and on the basis of the frequently reported finding that attitudes toward energy conservation are often more favorable than actual behavior (see, e.g., Seligman et al., 1979), we expected a higher proportion of people rating their own behavior relatively unfavorably than in Study 1. In this way we hoped to distinguish further the effects of subjects' own behavioral choice from evaluative factors.

Study 2

Method

Study 2 presented subjects with a questionnaire containing four pairs of behavioral alternatives related to home heating and energy conservation. A total of 219 subjects participated in this experiment. The four pairs of behavioral alternatives presented to subjects were

- thermostat (not) on lower temperature when temporarily not at home (e.g., shopping),
- (not) looking at energy use when buying electric home appliances,
- (not) closing curtains on winter nights, and

- thermostat always lower (higher) than 21 °C when at home.

Subjects were asked to rate a person who would choose a particular option for each of the four pairs of alternatives. These ratings were made with respect to the following four personality traits: practicality, thoughtfulness, thriftiness, and realism. The two extremes of the four rating scales were labeled as follows: *practical-unpractical*, *thoughtless-thoughtful*, *thrifty-wasteful*, and *unrealistic-realistic*.

After completing these ratings, subjects were asked to state their own choice regarding each of the four behavioral pairs on a 5-point scale ranging from *always choose* to *never choose* (see Study 1). Similar to Study 1, subjects were then asked to estimate the commonness of their behavior and, finally, to indicate which of each pair of alternatives they thought to be better.

Results

Perceptions of consensus. The percentage estimates made by subjects are summarized in Table 4. The false-consensus effect was similar to the findings obtained in Study 1 for the first two behavioral items, $F(1, 163) = 59.4$, $p < .001$, and $F(1, 171) = 41.1$, $p < .001$, respectively. The remaining two pairs show no significant effect. Overall, findings provide reasonable support for the false-consensus bias, although the effect is less pronounced than in Study 1. In the analyses we excluded the subjects who sometimes chose Option A and sometimes Option B, hence the differing numbers of subjects for the four pairs of behaviors.

Trait-inference ratings. Individual trait ratings were again measured as absolute discrepancies from the midpoint of the 100-point scale. Ratings were summed over the four scales to provide an overall measure of the rater's inferences about the actor who would choose each of the behavioral alternatives. Results are summarized in Table 5. Results show that the (A-B) difference in extremity is less positive for the rater who chooses the more conservationist alternative over the relatively nonconservationist option. All difference scores were positive, indicating that on average all subjects (irrespective of own behavioral choice) made more extreme trait inferences concerning actors who chose Option A. Furthermore, these difference scores were more positive for the raters opting for the nonconservationist option. These findings support Ross's hypothesis; that is, the difference score is more positive for the rater who chooses the second alternative over the first.

tion A show a slight tendency in the opposite direction.

To test whether raters' own behavioral preference exerted an influence on their trait ratings over and above any effect that could be accounted for by their evaluation of the two alternatives, we conducted a number of ANCOVAs along the same lines as in the first study. Results of these analyses are shown in Table 6 and indicate a significant covariate for three of the four behavioral items. The first item concerning thermostat control showed no significant effect due to the covariate. The second behavioral item (buying electric home appliances) showed a significant covariate, $F(1, 179) = 7.7, p < .01$. The third and fourth item also showed a significant effect due to the covariate, $F(1, 199) = 3.9, p < .05$, and $F(1, 111) = 7.1, p < .01$, respectively. The inclusion of the covariate lowered the value of the F ratio due to subjects' own choice. However, the effects of subjects' own behavioral choice remained significant for the first three items; this effect only disappeared on the last item. Thus, these analyses again show the effect of evaluative factors on subjects' trait ratings, but this influence is less pronounced than in the first study. One possible reason for the weaker effects obtained in this study could be related to the fact that the range of subjects' evaluative scores was more restricted than in Study 1. The mean evaluative ratings shown in the right-hand column of Table 5 show much more intergroup agreement than those obtained in Study 1.

General Discussion

Considered together, the two studies offer strong support for the hypothesis that raters' perceptions of social consensus reflect their own behavioral choices. This hypothesis was clearly confirmed in Study 1, whereas results of Study 2 showed a similar, but less pronounced, effect.

Results of the first study quite consistently contradicted the hypothesis of Ross et al. that people make more extreme and confident inferences about others who choose a behavioral option that differs from one's own preferred alternative. Findings indicated that more extreme traits were ascribed to others who opt for the same alternative as the rater. Further

Table 5
Trait Inferences About Personal Dispositions of Actors Behaving Like or Unlike Self and Evaluation of Behavioral Alternatives (Study 2)

Behavioral option	Own choice	Option A		Option B		Difference		Interaction F	Paired t test	Evaluation	
		M^a	SD	M	SD	M^b	SD			M^c	SD
Thermostat when not at home	(A) on lower temperature (B) not on lower temperature	157.9	34.8	156.8	37.8	+1.1	37.6	8.4***	0.3	+1.5	0.5
Buying electric home appliances	(A) look at energy use (B) don't look at energy use	126.9	44.0	104.3	66.2	+22.6	53.7	21.8***	4.0***	-0.4	0.9
Curtains	(A) closed on winter nights (B) not closed on winter nights	165.0	22.6	155.4	32.8	+9.7	28.5	7.5**	3.9***	+1.6	0.6
Thermostat when at home	(A) always lower than 21 °C (B) always higher than 20 °C	128.8	57.8	88.1	60.2	+40.7	56.0	4.4*	4.5***	+0.8	0.9
		159.9	29.3	149.3	40.2	+10.6	40.8		3.1***	+1.7	0.6
		150.1	41.6	118.9	63.4	+31.2	60.2		3.8***	+0.9	1.0
		150.0	42.8	142.3	49.5	+7.7	51.2		1.4	+1.0	0.7
		134.8	50.7	99.9	62.4	+34.9	76.4		2.3*	-0.4	0.7

* Scores represent the sum of the extremities on the four rating scales. Larger numbers reflect more extreme trait inferences for Option A than for Option B. Positive scores reflect more extreme trait inferences for Option A than for Option B; a negative score reflects the reverse (possible range from +2 to -2). All scores were significantly different from zero.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .005$. **** $p < .001$.

own alternative were rated in more positive terms than those choosing the other option. Interestingly, the only exception concerned the item on the use of phosphate detergents. In this case, the nonconservationists attributed more favorable and more extreme traits to others choosing the conservationist option than to others opting for their own choice. In summary, rating one's own behavioral preference favorably leads to more extreme and more favorable attributions to describe this particular behavior, whereas the alternative is described in less favorable but also less extreme terms. However, when one engages in behavior that one sees as less desirable (the use of phosphates in Study 1 and the nonconservationist behaviors in Study 2), one tends to ascribe more extreme and more favorable traits to the alternative, relatively positive, behavior.

The present research, therefore, seems to point at the importance of the ego-defensive or dissonance-reducing function of attributional inference. In other words, subjects choosing the alternative that is less desirable according to a consensually accepted norm do not wish to see their own behavior as the result of personal characteristics and in this way deny responsibility ("it's only a habit"). Thus, engaging in behavior that is seen as negative or relatively neutral seems to lead to two distinct types of influence. First, one overestimates the degree of consensus for one's own response. Second, one does not relate this behavior to personal characteristics.

Nonmotivational Factors

The present research provides some evidence regarding the possibility that "selective exposure" effects are responsible for the impression that one's own judgments and responses enjoy a high degree of consensus. Our findings cannot speak for the influence of selective exposure on estimated commonness but suggests that selective exposure is unlikely to lead to the attributional effects predicted by Ross et al. First, this explanation would be inconsistent with evidence indicating that more extreme trait inferences are made about more familiar, similar others. Second, our findings suggest that evaluative factors are more important than similarity of behavior in attributional inferences.

Evaluative factors, in summary, play an important role in attribution processes. Present evidence suggests that it is necessary to take evaluative and motivational aspects into account in one's attempt to explain differences in attributional preferences. The major influence of evaluative factors in the present context can be summarized in the following points: (a) positivity bias, that is, "good" behavior is generally regarded as being related to dispositional factors, whereas "bad" behavior is less likely to be interpreted in terms of personality characteristics, irrespective of one's own choice; (b) the attributional differences obtained by Ross et al. (1977) seem to apply best when people engage in relatively dissonant (i.e., negatively valenced) behaviors. We are thus suggesting that although cognitive biases may influence our perception of various behaviors, such biases do not explain the attributional preferences found in the present studies. The present research serves as a reminder that affective, motivational factors should be included in the study of false-consensus phenomena.

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