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Attitude extremity, consensus and diagnosticity

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Abstract

Studied the effects of attitude extremity on perceived consensus and willingness to ascribe trait terms to others with either pro or anti nuclear attitudes. Results showed that attitude extremity affected consensus estimates. Trait attributions revealed a clear effect for valence, especially for the extreme attitude groups. Subjects with extreme attitudes also ascribed more traits to both pro and anti others than subjects with relatively moderate attitudes.

Introduction

One of the biases emerging from the literature on how people perceive the opinions and behaviours of others is that people overestimate the degree of consensus concerning their own choices and behaviours. Ross, Green and House (1977) related this 'false consensus effect' to attributional processes. It is assumed that judges tend to see opinions and behaviours that differ from their own as relatively uncommon, and more revealing of personality characteristics than their own opinion or behaviour. To illustrate this effect, suppose two groups of subjects differ in their attitude towards the EEC. The person with a favourable attitude will see his or her opinion as relatively common and relatively devoid of information about his or her personality characteristics. By contrast the same person is assumed to see attitudes that differ from his or her own as less common and relatively revealing or diagnostic.

In a recent study Judd and Johnson (1981) pointed at the importance of affective intensity in perceptions of consensus and attributional inference. Their study focused on the issue of women's rights and subjects were asked to estimate the prevalence of pro, neutral and anti attitudes in various population groups. Their findings showed that more extreme subjects overestimated the prevalence of their own attitude, but also viewed the population as significantly more *polarized* on the women's rights issue. Secondly, the more extreme subjects also found information concerning others' position on the issue to be more diagnostic of personality traits. Extreme subjects judged pro and anti positions to be more prevalent, and also found *both* positions to be more informative concerning personality characteristics than subjects with relatively moderate attitudes. Judd and Johnson's argument was that extreme subjects find the issue to be of central concern and see it as central in how to respond to others. In other words, their findings showed that the usually obtained negative relationship between judged frequency of a choice and the informativeness of that choice concerning the actor's personality does not hold when subjects have extreme and involving attitudes. The present study focuses on the influence of attitude extremity on consensus estimates and willingness to infer personality characteristics.

Methods

A total of 611 subjects who took part in a larger scale study on attitudes towards nuclear energy (see van der Pligt, van der Linden and Ester, 1982) were asked to indicate their attitude towards 'building more nuclear power stations in The Netherlands' on a 5-point scale ranging from 'strongly opposed' to 'strongly in favour'. Subjects also estimated the percentage of the Dutch population and of Members of Parliament who would be in favour

of increasing the number of nuclear power stations. Finally, subjects were asked to select from a list of 12 trait-descriptive terms, any that they thought best described a typical pro nuclear person, and a typical anti nuclear person. This list contained, in random order, six adjectives relatively positive in evaluation (responsible, realistic, environment-conscious, level-headed, humanitarian and rational) and six relatively negative adjectives (ill-informed, short-sighted, weak-willed, complacent, selfish and alarmist).

Results and discussion

Attitudes towards increasing the number of nuclear power stations were as follows: 181 (29.5 per cent) were moderately or strongly in favour, 72 (11.7 per cent) were undecided, and 361 (58.8 per cent) were moderately or strongly opposed. Results in Table 1 show a clear effect of attitude on consensus estimates. The more pro one's attitude towards building more nuclear power stations, the higher the estimated percentage of the Dutch population sharing this opinion. Estimates ranged from 59 per cent for the extremely pro subjects to 28 per cent for the extremely anti subjects, the intermediate groups' estimates being 48, 41 and 35 per cent respectively, a significant linear effect ($F(1,574) = 229.9, p < 0.0001$). Furthermore, the estimates given by the extreme attitude groups were significantly more extreme than those of subjects with a similar but more moderate attitude. This was tested by comparing the extreme and moderate subjects on each side of the attitude continuum; t -values for this contrast were 4.7 and 3.0 for the pro and anti groups respectively, both significant at the 0.005 level. Results concerning the estimated percentage of MPs showed a similar pattern, but less clear-cut. Estimates were 56 per cent, 50, 46, 45 and 43 per cent for the five attitude groups, a significant linear effect ($F(1,560) = 30.0, p < 0.001$). The two contrasts showed only one significant effect due to extremity, i.e. the difference between extremely pro and moderately pro subjects (56 versus 50, $t = 2.1, p < 0.05$). Overall then, our data show that the more extreme attitude groups make significantly higher (for the pros) or lower (for the antis) prevalence estimates about the population as a whole and MPs. This effect is in accord with the 'false consensus' hypothesis. Due to the fact that our subjects were asked *only* to estimate the prevalence of pro attitudes, the present data do not allow a direct test of the polarization hypothesis of Judd and Johnson (1981). Table 2 shows the

Table 1. Mean prevalence estimates (%) of pro nuclear positions as a function of own attitude

Population group	Own attitude				
	Extremely pro ($n = 69$)	Pro ($n = 112$)	Neutral ($n = 72$)	Anti ($n = 81$)	Extremely anti ($n = 280$)
General population	59	48	41	35	28
Members of parliament	56	50	46	45	43

Table 2. Mean number of traits ascribed to a pro and anti target as a function of own attitude

Own attitude	n	Target					
		Pro-nuclear			Anti-nuclear		
		Positive traits	Negative traits	Total	Positive traits	Negative traits	Total
Extremely pro	69	2.91	0.12	3.03	0.54	2.43	2.97
Pro	112	2.75	0.13	2.88	0.67	2.01	2.68
Neutral	72	1.85	0.35	2.19	0.94	1.29	2.24
Anti	81	1.44	1.06	2.51	1.65	0.79	2.44
Extremely anti	280	0.69	1.85	2.55	2.86	0.18	3.05

mean number of positive and negative traits ascribed to a typical pro and anti person for the five attitude groups. The analysis of these mean trait ascriptions revealed a highly significant effect for extremity. Summed over the two targets, the extreme attitude groups ascribed 5.7 traits to the two targets, while the means for the subjects with relatively moderate attitudes and the neutrals were 5.3 and 4.4 respectively, a significant linear effect ($F(1,611) = 18.0$, $p < 0.001$). Inspection of Table 2 also suggests a tendency to ascribe positively valenced traits to one's own side and negatively valenced traits to the other side. This was tested by simply counting the number of positive traits minus the number of negative traits ascribed to each of the two target persons. The analysis of these trait evaluations revealed a highly significant effect for valence. The trait evaluations for the pro target were +2.8 (extremely pro subjects), +2.6, +1.5, +0.4 and -1.2 (extremely anti subjects), the F -ratio for the linear term being 442.8, $p < 0.001$. Trait evaluations for the anti target mirror the above, the scores were -1.9, -1.3, -0.3, +0.8 and +2.7, respectively; $F(1,609) = 409.1$, $p < 0.001$. Furthermore, the trait evaluations were significantly more extreme for the extreme attitude groups. A comparison of the extreme and moderate subjects revealed a significant contrast between the extreme and moderate pro subjects ($t = -2.0$, $p < 0.05$), and the extreme and moderate anti subjects ($t = -7.8$, $p < 0.001$) when ascribing traits to a typical anti target. Results concerning the pro target, showed a marginal difference between the two pro subject groups ($t = 0.8$, *n.s.*), and a more negative evaluation for the extreme anti subjects compared to the moderately antis ($t = 7.8$, $p < 0.001$). Finally, our results contradicted the prediction derived from attribution theory that high consensus should be accompanied by a relative absence of trait attributions. A paired t -test showed that *more* traits were ascribed to the target with the *same* attitude as the rater (2.9 versus 2.6 for others with a different attitude). The obtained t -value (excluding the neutrals) was 6.3, $p < 0.001$, *d.f.* = 541). Summarizing, our results suggest that people with extremely committed attitudes on an issue actually engage in very little of the active information processing assumed by work in attribution theory.

Results reflected a valence effect in trait attributions, and suggested that this effect is mediated by attitude extremity. Our findings point at the importance of affective intensity, and confirm the conclusion of Judd and Johnson (1981) and van der Pligt (1981) that affect should be included in the study of these judgmental processes.

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