

## False Consensus Estimation and Social Behavior:

### The Influence of Personal Importance on Beliefs

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The false consensus effect (FCE) refers to the tendency to overestimate consensus for one's own judgments and behavior. Past research has argued that FCE is robust. However, little attention has been paid to the specific content of FCE tasks. This study examined the influence of social evaluation and the personal importance of tasks on the false consensus phenomenon. This research also investigated the influence of assumed competence on consensus estimations. Participants ( $N=235$ ) completed a questionnaire consisting of judgments of belief and an assumed-competence scale, and estimated the percentage of the consensus for the judgments of belief. The study results demonstrated that the false consensus phenomenon was influenced by the level of personal importance of the judgment of belief.

**Key words:** false consensus effect, personal importance, social behavior, judgments of belief, assumed competence

#### INTRODUCTION

People tend to imagine that others make the same judgments and display the same behavior as they do. In other words, they tend to suppose that their judgments and behavior are common. For example, a man may think that many people like his preferred colors. Likewise, those who love cats imagine that many people like cats. In this way, individuals frequently overestimate the consensus of judgments and behavior.

Ross, Green, and House (1977) conducted empirical research on the phenomenon whereby people estimate that their judgments and behavior are common. They compared two ratios, the percentage of people agreeing that other people agreed with their judgments and behavior to the percentage of people agreeing that other people did not agree with them. They defined the phenomenon by which a difference occurred between these two ratios as the False Consensus Effect (FCE)

In a study that typifies FCE research, Ross et al. (1977) had

attempted to estimate consensus on judgments and behaviors involved in 35 tasks. However, their results lacked consistency. It is thought that two factors influence FCE: personal importance and social evaluation. For instance, if a man does not regard the social advancement of women as personally important, he is not interested in sharing his judgment with people. As a result, he does not overestimate the number of such people, and the FCE is minimally produced. In contrast, if he assumes that this problem is positively evaluated socially, significant FCE is strongly produced.

This study focuses on the influence of personal importance and social evaluation on the estimated consensus task. The findings of past studies on this issue are not consistent (e.g. Ross et al., 1977; Kenworthy & Miller, 2001). This inconsistency likely arises from the influence of various social evaluations of the tasks. For example, one issue examined in past studies, support for the legalization of abortion, tended to arise in negative social evaluations, whereas support or opposition regarding the abolition of the death penalty tended to lead to ambiguous social evaluations. The former is influenced by social desirability, while the latter is influenced by the level of personal importance.

This research uses judgments of belief as the tasks of estimating consensus. These are defined as those judgments for which it is difficult to receive social evaluations. Furthermore, personal judgments (such as personal interests and tastes) and socially related judgments (such as hard-to-perceive differences between good-bad and true-false, but related socially) are included in these judgments.

This discussion leads us to the following hypotheses.

H1: Individuals who assign a high importance to personal beliefs will estimate a greater consensus than those who do not assign such importance.

This study considers the relationship between the estimated consensus for judgments of belief and assumed competence (AC). AC is defined as a form of illusory competence which one gains by demeaning others. In addition, AC does not depend so much on actual experiences because it is perceived in the undervaluing of others (Hayamizu, Kino, Takagi, & Tan, 2004). Individuals scoring high on the AC scale tend to demean others to regain their own self-confidence (Hayamizu, 2006). Therefore, it appears that they overestimate consensus to gain greater mental security.

The judgments of belief discussed in this paper are categorized as personal judgments or socially related judgments. We predicted that the influences of AC on the consensus estimates for these judgments would differ. First, regarding personal judgments, high-AC individuals are able to demean others by perceiving that one's own hobbies and inclinations are particularly different from others and are thus able to maintain self-confidence. Therefore, they need not overestimate the consensus. Regarding socially related judgments, high-AC individuals are able to attain mental stability by belonging to

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**Table 1.** Means of estimated consensus according to assumed-competence and personal importance.

| Judgements                | Assumed-competence  |         |         |         | F(1, 211)          | Interactions |                     |
|---------------------------|---------------------|---------|---------|---------|--------------------|--------------|---------------------|
|                           | High                |         | Low     |         |                    |              |                     |
|                           | Personal importance |         |         |         | Assumed-competence |              | Personal importance |
|                           | High                | Low     | High    | Low     |                    |              |                     |
| Judgements of belief      | 59.26               | 53.60   | 58.84   | 54.02   | .00                | 57.80***     | .37                 |
|                           | (19)                | (10.72) | (8.18)  | (8.25)  | (5.91)             |              |                     |
| Personal judgements       | 56.12               | 52.76   | 58.55   | 53.40   | 1.07               | 11.41***     | .51                 |
|                           | (11)                | (19.68) | (16.99) | (8.71)  | (7.34)             |              |                     |
| Social related judgements | 59.81               | 53.17   | 53.67   | 47.59   | 13.28***           | 15.97***     | .86                 |
|                           | (8)                 | (13.52) | (17.71) | (15.30) | (18.89)            |              |                     |

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$  ( $SD$ )  $N = 213$ .

the majority, and therefore they maintain their self-confidence by estimating that their judgments are common. Thus, they need to overestimate consensus. Furthermore, a judgment which is assigned a high personal importance indicates strong ego-involvement, and high-AC individuals have a greater need to attain mental stability than low-AC individuals. Thus, high-AC individuals need to overestimate consensus more than individuals with low AC, when the personal importance of the judgment is high.

H2: A person scoring high on the assumed competence scale will overestimate consensus when the personal importance of the judgment is high. The above effect will become larger in socially related judgments than in personal judgments.

## METHOD

**Participants.** The participants were 235 Japanese undergraduate students (161 females, 73 males, and 1 unknown, with a mean age of 19.1 years;  $SD = 1.18$ ).

**Procedure and questionnaire.** The attitude scale defined by Byrne (1971) was used to create 30 items involving belief judgments. The 15 individual judgment items required a judgment about a personal matter, and the 15 socially related ones required a judgment about a matter linked to society.

For all 30 items, the participants were asked to (1) make their own judgment and estimate the percentage of people with the same judgment (estimate consensus), (2) indicate (on a four-point scale) whether an item is important personally (personal importance), (3) rate (on a five-point scale) the social evaluation of each item (social evaluation; response categories ranged from (1) very socially positive to (5) very socially negative), and (4) indicate AC on a five-point scale (11 items) (Hayamizu et al., 2004).

## RESULTS

Data for the 213 participants who completed the tasks were used for the following analysis. First, frequency distribution lists of the judgments of belief (30 items) were created in order to easily select the items that were not given a social evalua-

tion. Of these 30 items, 11 items with prejudiced social evaluations were deleted from the analysis (more than 20% of their answers were identified as negative or positive socially). This study regarded the remaining 19 items as difficult-to-rate social evaluations. The 19 items were broken down into personal judgments (11 items; for example, I like novels) and socially related judgments (8 items; for example, I think that nuclear power plants are necessary). The Cronbach coefficient alphas of the former (latter) was 0.66 (0.80). Next, each participant rated the 19 items on personal importance (important-not important). The averages of the consensus estimates were calculated based on high/low scoring of personal importance. Furthermore, participants were classified by high/low scoring on AC ( $M = 32$ ).

In order to test H1 and H2, the three judgments were each examined that a 2 (personal importance)  $\times$  2 (AC), and a mixed-model analysis of variance (ANOVAs) was performed on the means of the consensus estimates. Table 1 summarizes the results. Concerning the three judgments (belief judgments, 19 items; personal judgments, 11 items; and socially related judgments, 8 items), the participants overestimated consensus more for those judgments with high personal importance than for those with low personal importance. It can be inferred from these results that H1 was supported.

In the three judgments, the interaction between personal importance and AC was not significant. These results were not consistent with H2. (1) For belief judgments (19 items), the effect of personal importance was significant at the 0.001 level. Individuals who appraised personal importance highly overestimated consensus compared with individuals who appraised personal importance lower. (2) For personal judgments (11 items), the effect of personal importance was significant at the 0.001 level. (3) For socially related judgments (8 items), the effects of personal importance and AC were significant at the 0.001 level in both cases. Individuals scoring high on AC overestimated the degree of consensus more than individuals with low scores.

## DISCUSSION

Nineteen belief judgment items were used in this study (11 personal judgments items and eight socially related judgments items). Personal importance clearly affected the belief judgments consisting of personal judgments and socially related judgments. It is clear that individuals who value beliefs and judgments highly estimated a greater consensus than did individuals who valued them lower. From these results, it would appear that the influence of personal importance that was so inconsistent in past studies has been demonstrated by belief judgments, which are difficult-to-rate social evaluations (personal judgments and socially related judgments).

Furthermore, in socially related judgments, participants scoring high on AC overestimated consensus more than those scoring low. However, the influence of AC on personal judgments was not evident. In other words, this result implies that high-AC individuals improve their own self-esteem by estimating that other people make the same judgments as themselves, when they evaluate issues as socially linked and equivocal questions.

The limit of this research is that it was unable to consider

the prediction that the influence of personal importance on judgments of belief was stronger than that on other judgments. Judgments other than belief judgments should be studied further.

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