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Perceptions of the Magnitude and Diversity of Social Support

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Three studies were conducted to test the hypotheses that subjects would overestimate the proportion of their peers who shared their opinion on an issue and that they would perceive their own opinion group as consisting of people with a wider and more diverse range of values and outlooks than those holding different opinions. The first study was conducted following a period of intense debate about sexism on a college campus. Subjects estimated student opinion on issues related to sexism and indicated how diverse or similar they perceived supporters and nonsupporters of the women's movement to be. In a second study subjects estimated the proportion of students who evaluated President Carter's performance as good, fair, or poor and then indicated how diverse or similar the three groups of students were who held these various opinions. A third study closely replicated the second, using the issue of divestiture of college-owned stock in South Africa. In all three studies, subjects were divided into groups on the basis of their own attitudes. Results consistently supported the hypotheses.

In a recent restatement of social comparison theory, Goethals and Darley (1977) suggested that people may often distort the social consensus for their opinions in several ways that make them more confident that these opinions are correct. First, people may simply perceive that a larger proportion of potential comparison persons agrees with them than is actually the case. Second, they may perceive their supporters to be relatively diverse with respect to basic values, attitudes, and interests and those who disagree with them as relatively similar to each other. The latter perceptions permit people to believe that their own opinions are entity caused (cf. Kelley, 1967) and do not reflect any particular personal characteristic or value, whereas opinions on the other side of the issue stem from a common bias. While there may be limits on an individual's ability to distort the size of various consensuses, he can still attribute his

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opinion to the entity on the basis of Kelley's consensus criterion if he can persuade himself that the people sharing his view are diverse and represent many different *kinds* of people (if not many different individuals) while feeling at the same time that those who think differently, although numerous, are similar to each other and represent a narrow and presumably biased point of view.

While there is no existing evidence that bears directly on the perceptions of diversity issue, several studies show that people believe their behaviors and opinions to be highly consensual. Research by Ross and his associates (Ross, 1977; Ross, Greene, & House, 1977) on the "false consensus bias" shows that people who behave in a certain way assume that this behavior is more common than do people who act differently. In the realm of opinions Korte (1972) has shown that subjects tend to overestimate how close their own positions are to the majority opinion. A recent survey study by Fields and Schuman (1976) on racial and political attitudes showed marked evidence of "looking glass perceptions," a general propensity to believe that other people's opinions are the same as one's own. Other evidence that people overestimate the extent to which their thoughts, feelings, and actions are shared by others has been reviewed by Holmes (1968) under the rubric "attributive projection."

The purpose of the present research was to explore more extensively subjects' perceptions of the magnitude and, particularly, the diversity of social support for their opinions. Three studies were conducted to show that people holding particular positions on various issues of wide concern, both locally and nationally, would believe that a larger and more diverse group shared their position than would people with different opinions. The research was also intended to show that subjects' perceptions of their own group as having diverse values and attitudes are not an artifact of their perceiving it as very large. That is, people were expected to perceive their own opinion group as more diverse than other opinion groups and that they would do so even when they believed that their own opinion group was in the minority.

While the prediction of a magnification of diversity effect was derived from an attributional analysis of social comparison processes, such a finding would be open to several interpretations, some emphasizing motivational factors and others perceptual or cognitive factors. In the discussion to follow we will outline several reasons people might magnify the size and diversity of groups that agree with them and comment where possible on their applicability to the results.

EXPERIMENT 1

The first study was conducted just after a series of incidents on the Williams College campus that caused a controversy over sexism and the

women's movement and a split in student opinion. The first incident occurred when the College newspaper, the *Record*, ran a series of Schlitz Beer ads featuring an extraordinarily shapely woman dressed in a tightly fitted T-shirt. Angry students held a "sit-in" at the *Record* office and letters of protest to the editor streamed in. A second incident occurred a few weeks later when a group of male students paraded through the college library carrying an inflatable female doll, scantily clothed in wine-stained underpants, dropped it from a balcony and proceeded to sing an obscene song. Several weeks later, a packed audience attended a forum on sexism to air further feelings and thoughts as to why such incidents had occurred and to discuss possible changes such as hiring more women faculty.

This study took advantage of the controversy, which offered a variety of opinions on widely debated issues. Subjects filled out a questionnaire in which they were asked to identify and characterize the sympathetic and unsympathetic elements of the student body regarding women's rights and the events mentioned above. They were also asked to indicate their own opinions. It was predicted that subjects would view their own group, those with whom they agreed, as large and diverse, with a heterogeneous set of values, and would see the other group, those with whom they disagreed, as small and narrow, composed of similar types of people with the same basic values and outlooks.

Method

Subjects. Subjects were 18 men and 19 women, juniors and seniors at Williams College, chosen randomly from among students in the college library, with restrictions only to ensure that there were approximately equal numbers of men and women. Three subjects, one man and two women, had to be eliminated from the data analyses because of incomplete questionnaires.

Procedure

Subjects were given a three-part questionnaire. In the first section, they estimated what percentage of Williams students looked favorably, unfavorably, or with indifference on various issues and events related to sexism including the following: the Schlitz Beer ads in the college newspaper, the library incident involving the inflatable female doll, the forum on sexism held subsequently, and the number of women faculty on campus. Subjects then reported their own opinions on each of these issues.

The second section of the questionnaire dealt with the subjects' perception of students who were supportive and nonsupportive of the women's movement. They rated on a 7-point scale how diverse or similar in terms of background, basic values, and outlooks on life they viewed students who supported or did not support the women's movement.

The final portion of the questionnaire dealt with various "types" of students. After a brief description of 28 types (e.g., artistic, athletic, religious, business, etc.), the subjects were asked to indicate whether they saw each type as being predominantly supportive of the women's movement. Finally, the subjects indicated their own degree of support for the women's movement on a 7-point scale.

Results

The female subjects were significantly more supportive of the women's movement ($M = 5.88$) than were the male subjects ($M = 4.76$), $t(33) = 2.50, p < .02$. However, since the pattern of men and women's data on all dependent measures was virtually identical, they were combined.

Subjects were expected to overestimate the percentage of persons who agree with them and to underestimate the percentage who disagree. The data presented in Table 1 support this hypothesis. Subjects who evaluated a particular situation positively estimated that a higher proportion shared their position than those who evaluated it negatively and vice versa. The data also show that when subjects were indifferent about an issue, they estimated that a higher percentage were also indifferent than did subjects who had a positive or negative opinion. Finally, note that subjects tended to overestimate the size of the group holding the minority opinion regardless of their own opinion. This somewhat surprising finding will be discussed below.

The subjects were split into two groups of as nearly equal size as possible according to their degree of support for the women's movement. Since subjects were supportive overall, this procedure resulted in placing those who had scores of 6 or 7 on the support scale into one group ($n = 19$) and those with scores of 5 or less in another ($n = 15$). The more supportive and less supportive subjects were first compared in terms of how many of the 28 "types" of students they had indicated were supportive of the women's movement. The more supportive subjects estimated that a significantly greater number of types support the women's movement ($M = 18.68$) than did less supportive subjects ($M = 14.20$), $t(32) = 2.31, p < .05$. These data suggest that subjects on one side of an issue perceived those who agreed with them either as more numerous, more diverse, or both than did those on the other side of the issue. More direct and unconfounded support for the hypothesis that others are perceived as more diverse if they agree comes from an earlier item on the questionnaire, where subjects were asked to indicate how diverse or similar male and female students were who supported or did not support the women's movement. Both more and less supportive subjects perceived the supportive students to be more diverse than nonsupportive students. However, the difference between the diversity of the supportive students and the diversity of nonsupportive students was perceived to be significantly greater by the more supportive subjects ($M = 4.79$ vs 2.95) than by the less supportive subjects ($M = 3.78$ vs 3.52), $t(32) = 2.24, p < .05$.

EXPERIMENT 2

The second study concerned opinions on the performance of President Carter. It was predicted that each of three groups of subjects—those rating Carter's performance as good, those rating it fair, and those rating it

TABLE 1
SUBJECTS ESTIMATES OF OTHERS' OPINIONS RELATED TO SEXISM

Beer ads	Others' opinions		
	Ads sexist	Ads good	No opinion
Actual percentage	17.6	58.5	23.5
Percentage estimated by subjects believing that:			
Ads sexist	48.3	43.3	8.3
Ads good	24.8	55.4	19.6
No opinion	31.5	21.6	46.9
<i>F</i> (2,31) =	5.73**	10.07***	14.70***
Library incident	Others' opinions		
	Incident offensive	Incident excusable	No opinion
Actual percentage	79.4	17.6	2.9
Percentage estimated by subjects believing that:			
Incident offensive	69.9	18.4	11.3
Incident excusable	44.2	45.5	10.3
<i>F</i> (1,32) =	9.86**	17.31*	<1
Sexism forum	Others' opinions		
	Forum important	Forum unnecessary	No opinion
Actual percentage	85.3	14.7	0
Percentage estimated by subjects believing that:			
Forum important	64.5	22.7	12.8
Forum unnecessary	45.6	35.6	18.6
<i>F</i> (1,32) =	9.42**	3.92	<1
Women faculty	Others' opinions		
	There are enough	There are not enough	No opinion
Actual percentage	32.3	52.9	14.7
Percentage estimated by subjects believing that:			
There are enough	34.5	30.9	34.6
There are not enough	21.3	48.7	30.0
No opinion	27.0	29.0	44.0
<i>F</i> (2,31) =	4.30*	3.87*	1.04

*** $p < .001$.

** $p < .01$.

* $p < .05$.

poor—would see their own group as larger and more diverse than would other groups.

Method

Subjects. The subjects were 151 students in an introductory psychology course at Williams College.

Procedure

At the end of a regular class period, subjects were given a questionnaire pertaining to the performance of President Carter. They were first asked to indicate whether they felt Carter was doing a good job, a fair job, or a poor job. Then, after estimating what percentage of Williams students would evaluate Carter's performance as good, fair, or poor, they rated on a 5-point scale how similar or diverse they saw each of these three groups of students. The diversity measure asked subjects whether they felt each group of students was "similar to each other, sharing the same values and outlooks," or "a diverse group of people with different values and outlooks?"

Results

All 151 subjects answered the questions about diversity but 27 (18%) did not give percentage estimates. Subjects indicated it was very difficult to give percentage estimates. In the diversity analyses below these 27 subjects were included. The results are virtually identical if they were eliminated.

The subjects were divided into three groups on the basis of their opinions about Carter's performance as president. Their estimate of the percentage of students thinking Carter was doing a good, fair, and poor job are presented in the top portion of Table 2. There were modest differences in the predicted direction indicating that subjects perceived their own group to be larger than did other groups. The lack of the usual robust false consensus findings may have occurred because of subjects' familiarity with various poll ratings on President Carter, which could limit their distortions of the magnitude of opinion groups.

Subjects' estimates of how similar or diverse they perceived each opinion group—those ranking Carter's performance as good, fair or poor—are presented in the lower portion of Table 2. An unweighted means analysis of variance of these ratings shows a main effect of others' opinions, $F(2, 296) = 7.12, p < .01$, and an interaction of others' opinions and subjects' own opinion, $F(4, 296) = 8.46, p < .001$. In general, persons who thought that Carter was doing a good job were perceived as less diverse than others. More important, however, subjects perceived people whose opinions were the same as their own to be more diverse than those whose opinions differed from their own. A supplementary comparison of subjects' perceptions of the diversity of their own group with their perceptions of the diversity of the other two groups combined was significant, $F(1, 148) = 49.78, p < .001$.

TABLE 2
 SUBJECTS ESTIMATES OF MAGNITUDE AND DIVERSITY OF STUDENT OPINION
 ABOUT PRESIDENT CARTER

	Others' opinions		
	Carter doing a good job	Carter doing a fair job	Carter doing a poor job
Percentage estimates			
Actual percentage	17.9	66.2	15.9
Percentage estimated by subjects believing that:			
Carter doing a good job	26.7	47.4	25.9
Carter doing a fair job	21.4	50.1	28.3
Carter doing a poor job	19.2	44.9	35.9
<i>F</i> (2, 121) =	2.40*	1.18	3.32**
Diversity ratings			
Diversity rating by subjects believing that:			
Carter doing a good job	2.93	2.67	2.63
Carter doing a fair job	2.35	3.29	2.52
Carter doing a poor job	2.38	3.08	3.38

Note. The higher the rating the more diverse the subjects rate the others holding the opinion. Five-point scale.

** $p < .05$.

* $p < .10$.

To explore the relationship between subjects' estimates of their own group's size and their perceptions of its diversity, these two variables were correlated under each combination of own opinion and others' opinion separately. No significant correlations occurred either between subjects' perception of the size of their own group and their perception of its diversity (mean $r = -.05$) or between their perceptions of the size of other groups and their perceptions of their diversity (mean $r = +.10$).

EXPERIMENT 3

This study was a replication of Experiment 2 except that the issue was one of intense local concern and subjects were interviewed on the telephone. The study was initiated immediately following the publication in the college newspaper of a poll regarding student opinion on the issue of the college divesting itself of stock held in corporations conducting busi-

ness in South Africa. One aim of the study was to see whether false consensus effects would be lessened after published information was available about other people's beliefs. The debate about divestiture had been heated on campus for several months.

Method

Subjects. The subjects were 29 juniors and seniors at Williams who were contacted randomly by telephone. One subject was eliminated from the analyses because she was unable to answer most of the questions. Five additional subjects did not completely answer the questions but were included in analyses for questions they did answer.

Procedure

Subjects were told that the caller was conducting a study of students' perceptions of the divestiture controversy. They were first asked whether they had seen the results of the newspaper poll printed a few days earlier. Those who had seen the poll were asked to try to recall the percentage of students who were reported to be in favor of divestiture, opposed to divestiture or undecided. Then subjects were told whether they had seen the poll or not to indicate what they believed to be the actual percentage of students holding these positions. Next they were asked to indicate from 1 to 5 whether they viewed each of the three student opinion groups as being "similar to each other, sharing the same values and outlooks," or "a diverse group of people with different values and outlooks." Finally each subject was asked his or her own opinion on divestiture.

Results

Sixty-one percent of the students interviewed had seen the newspaper poll. These subjects were able to recall the poll quite accurately. There was no evidence of systematic distortion in recall of the poll. All but two of these subjects, however, indicated that they believed the true proportion of subjects opposing or favoring divestiture to be different from what was in the poll. In the results reported below, there were no differences between those who had seen the poll and those who had not and their data were combined for all analyses.

Subjects were divided into three groups according to their own opinions. Their estimates of the percentage of students who were for, against or undecided about divestiture are presented in Table 3. These data indicate that subjects gave higher estimates of the size of their own opinion groups than did other subjects

Subjects' estimates of the similarity or diversity of members of each opinion group are presented in Table 3. Analyses of these ratings yielded a significant main effect of others' opinions, $F(2, 44) = 5.54, p < .01$, and the predicted interaction of this variable with subjects' own opinion, $F(4, 44) = 3.86, p < .01$. The undecided group was perceived overall as the most diverse and the antdivestiture group as the least diverse. More important, in each of the three cases, subjects perceived people with opinions the same as their own as more diverse than those whose opinions differed. The comparison of subjects' perceptions of the diversity of their

TABLE 3
 SUBJECTS ESTIMATES OF MAGNITUDE AND DIVERSITY OF STUDENT OPINION
 ABOUT DIVESTITURE

	Others' opinions		
	In favor of divestiture	Opposed to divestiture	Undecided
Percentage estimates			
Actual percentage	42.9	32.1	25.0
Percentage estimated by subjects:			
In favor of divestiture	54.2	22.1	23.8
Opposed to divestiture	32.6	40.8	26.7
Undecided	44.0	24.0	32.0
<i>F</i> (2,23) =	6.78*	7.71*	<1
Diversity ratings			
Diversity ratings by subjects:			
In favor of divestiture	3.78	1.89	3.67
Opposed to divestiture	2.44	3.44	3.67
Undecided	3.29	2.71	3.71

Note. The higher the rating the more diverse the subjects rate the others holding the opinion. Five-point scale.

* $p < .01$.

own group with their perceptions of the diversity of the other two groups combined was significant, $F(1,22) = 9.38$, $p < .01$. As in the Carter study, none of the correlations between subjects' percentage estimates and their diversity ratings for their own group (mean $r = -.04$) or other groups (mean $r = +.14$) is significant.

DISCUSSION

The main findings of the three studies are consistent and clear. The "false consensus" or "looking glass perception" effects are replicated and what can be called the "magnification of diversity" phenomenon is demonstrated. As predicted, people do overestimate the proportion of others that agree with them and magnify their diversity. In addition, the findings support the proposition that perceptions of diversity are not dependent on perceptions of magnitude. For one thing, there are several instances in the data where people recognize that their group is in the minority but perceive it to be highly diverse nevertheless. For example, the students who thought President Carter was doing a good job and those

thinking he was doing a poor job perceived persons sharing their attitude as distinctly less numerous than those in the middle. Yet both of these groups saw themselves as more diverse than this larger middle group. Second, none of the within group correlations between the perceptions of the size of a group and the diversity of that group is significant. Finally, it was an impression of the investigators that subjects could readily make diversity ratings but often felt extremely unsure about the percentage estimates. It is interesting that in the Carter study all subjects answered the diversity questions but 18% did not provide percentage estimates.

One other aspect of the results should be noted. On most of the issues in the first study and in the Carter study, subjects in all opinion groups overestimated the size of the group holding the minority opinion, or stating it the other way, underestimated the size of the group holding the majority opinion. Korte (1972) and Fields and Schuman (1976) report results that are similar but it is not all clear what should be made of them. Korte speculates that perhaps minority groups are more vocal in their feelings than large majorities and make their weight felt disproportionately. Another possibility is that because subjects are so unsure of the actual percentages they make estimates which avoid extremes. This explanation fits the present data rather well. The issue deserves further research.

How can the main findings best be understood? The motivational perspective that predicted them, based on social comparison considerations, suggests that people distort both consensus and diversity estimates so that they can feel that their opinions are correct. However, there are many other possible explanations as well. First, it should be explicitly recognized that the three studies reported here are essentially correlational and it may be that causal relation between the variables is the reverse of the proposed social comparison relation. Perhaps subjects adopt opinions that they believe to be shared by a large and diverse or representative group of others. This explanation cannot be conclusively ruled out. In the Carter study subjects were asked their own opinions first, which suggests that the results do not simply reflect subjects indicating they share the attitude of an opinion group that they have just described as large and diverse. Still, assuming that the data are not artifactual in this way does not rule out the conformity explanation. Actually, it could well be that both conformity and motivated distortion processes operate in the real world. Perhaps people adopt opinions based on some conception of what others around them think but then let their motive to feel correct dictate further consensus and diversity estimates. In any case, the causal relation between the variables studied here needs to be pinned down in future research.

Another explanation of the results, which emphasizes cognitive factors, is that subjects simply believe that they are correct and therefore expect

all others to agree unless they have some axe to grind or idiosyncratic bias. Thus they would conclude that people who agree are numerous and that those who have strayed from the truth are few and commonly flawed. Another account emphasizing selectivity or bias in subjects' social interaction patterns is mentioned by Ross (1977). That is, subjects judgments may reflect interpersonal reality as they actually experience it and may not indicate a distortion of the evidence they have available. For example, people may interact selectively with those who share important attitudes, they may be unaware of these selective interaction patterns, and they may thus perceive like-minded others as many and divergent-minded others as few on the basis of their direct interpersonal experience. People may also be more sensitive to whatever shades of opinion difference there are among those with whom they agree and interact than those who are avoided because they disagree. Essentially, then, this "selective exposure" hypothesis sees people as simply estimating the size and diversity of consensus on the basis of available data with no motivated distortion.

Another possibility is that the results reflect some kind of impression management or self-presentation effect (Goffman, 1959; Tedeschi, Schlenker, & Bonoma, 1971). Perhaps subjects merely report seeing their own group as large and diverse for the sake of credibility and power without really believing it. This view assumes people recognize the social desirability of their opinions being shared by a large and representative consensus, but it stops short of proposing that they will want to perceive their opinions as consensual or will distort reality to convince themselves that that is the case. Still another possibility is that subjects believe both that they like most people and that they like many different kinds of people. Further, their friends, who are thus perceived as numerous and diverse, may have similar opinions, so that the perception that those who agree are numerous and diverse follows.

The findings of the present study do not allow a choice between these competing explanations. There is some evidence that people do not make use of all available consensus data and this may indicate that their estimates of the consensus reflect wish more than pure perception. In the divestiture study subjects simply refused to believe the published poll of student opinion even though our own results indicate it was accurate. Those who saw the poll perceived virtually the same proportions of students holding various opinions on the issue as their like-minded peers who did not see the poll. This observation suggests that subjects perceived the size of opinion groups according to their wishes and disregarded evidence to the contrary. Still, however, no conclusive statement can be made about just what process produced the magnification of diversity findings in the present study or the false consensus effects found here and elsewhere. The door is open to further research on these matters.

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