# Research Demonstration: The False Consensus Effect

In science, we emphasize systematic, careful observation as a key to overcoming the limits of other methods of acquiring knowledge. That is, we trust systematic observation more than we trust our own intuition. We can actually investigate this issue. The following description provides you with the details necessary to conduct a simple study to investigate the accuracy of human intuitions.

We often believe that others are more like ourselves than they really are. Thus, our predictions about others' beliefs or behaviors, based on casual observation, are very likely to err in the direction of our own beliefs or behavior. For example, college students who preferred brown bread estimated that over 50% of all other college students preferred brown bread, while white-bread eaters estimated that 37% showed brown bread preference (Ross, Greene, & House, 1977). This is known as the false consensus effect (Ross et al., 1977; Mullen, Atkins, Champion, Edwards, Hardy, Story, & Vanderlok, 1985). The false consensus effect provides the basis for the following demonstration, which emphasizes the need for systematic rather than casual observation.

You can use the set of six questions, below, to investigate this. Before describing the false consensus effect, have friends, roommates or classmates (other classes, not PSY250) answer the questions listed below. Next, have students predict the **UB undergraduate mean** for each question. Keep a record of the responses for each person who participates. According to the false consensus effect, students' predictions about the UB mean should be influenced by their own positions. Consequently, a student whose position is below the UB mean is likely to make a prediction that will be below the UB mean as well.

There are ethical constraints on the use of human participants that you must follow if you wish to try this with people.

1. Do not collect any identifying information on your participants. The answers to these questions (data) should be anonymous. Even though you may know the person, do NOT record any identifying information.
2. When you ask someone to participate, explain the basic nature of the study. You want to ask people how often they do certain things, like laundry, and how often they think other UB undergrads do these same things. You are doing this as part of a class on learning the scientific method. If they participate, they will be asked to answer six questions about themselves and also about other UB undergraduates. They can choose not to answer any question. Tell your prospective participant that all answers are recorded anonymously and no information identifying them is being recorded.
3. If they indicate that they are willing, ask the questions or let them read them. You can do this either way. The questions appear below on a separate page for your use.
4. Afterward, thank your participant. Explain to them that your study is looking at how people estimate how often others do various tasks and whether these estimates are influenced by how often they do these same tasks.

To demonstrate the effect statistically, compute the UB mean for each question using the students' personal data. Unless you do this with a lot of people (25 or more), your data may not accurately represent UB undergrads. The easiest way to get around this is to pool your data with those collected by others in the class. Next, compute a score for each participant in the following way: For each question, score a +1 if the participant's personal answer and predicted UB mean are either both below or both above the actual UB mean; score a -1 if the participant's personal score and predicted class mean are on opposite sides of the actual UB mean. Sum all six questions so that each participant now has a single score that ranges between -6 and +6. If people err randomly, the average score for all students should be zero. In contrast, if people err in the direction of their own beliefs, the average should be greater than zero. A simple, one-group *t*-test can be calculated using a predicted difference of zero for the null hypothesis.

**Further Reading**

Mullen, B., Atkins, J. L., Champion, D. S., Edwards, C., Hardy, D., Story, J. E., & Vanderlok, M. (1985). The false consensus effect: A meta-analysis of 115 hypothesis tests. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *21*, 262-283.

Ross, L., Greene, D., & House, P. (1977). The false consensus phenomenon: An attributional bias in self-perception and social perception processes. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *13*, 279-301.

## Behavior Questions

| Personal answer | | Prediction for UB undergrads |
|---|---|---|
| ____ | 1. How many loads of laundry do you wash per week? | _____ |
| ____ | 2. How many times per year do you attend worship services at a church or temple? | _____ |
| ____ | 3. How many times per week do you eat a meal from a fast-food restaurant? | _____ |
| ____ | 4. How many times per year do you wash your car? | _____ |
| ____ | 5. How many times per year do you see a movie at a theater? | _____ |
| ____ | 6. How many times per day do you drink coffee? | _____ |