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Attitudes toward outgroups and the perception of consensus: All feet do not wear one shoe

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Abstract.

Although social perception research has been carried out across a number of diverse domains, to the best of our knowledge, studies have not directly assessed the relationship between attitudes toward the out-group and perceptions of community support for those attitudes. In the present research, we report the findings of a study conducted in Western Australia using data collected from 653 participants from three different locations. The main thrust of our study was the accuracy of beliefs about consensus as it related to attitudes toward two marginalised groups: Indigenous Australians and asylum seekers. With respect to their attitudes toward these two groups, our respondents were placed in seven categories corresponding to their responses to our seven point attitude scales. Three main findings emerged. First, respondents at all seven levels overestimated community support for their views with respect to both Indigenous Australians and asylum seekers. Second, as respondents in both groups became more rejecting, their estimates of community support progressively increased in a linear fashion. Third, respondents in the more negative categories were significantly less accurate in their estimates than those in the more positive categories. How these findings might contribute to programs designed to reduce prejudice is discussed.
Introduction

There is an old proverb which says “All feet cannot wear one shoe”. Clearly, this is the case. But often people do believe that “most feet wear their shoes”. In other words, their opinions are consensually shared. In the present paper, we examined the extent to which people believe that their attitudes toward two out-groups (Indigenous Australians and asylum seekers) were shared by others in the Australian community, and the link between accuracy of perceived consensus with prejudice toward those two out-groups. Research that attempts to identify the roots of prejudice toward Indigenous Australians and asylum seekers would seem to be a worthwhile undertaking if one is concerned about the level of prejudice directed toward these two out-groups and about the development of more accepting attitudes. These two groups are particularly important because previous research finds that they are two of the most marginalized groups in Australia at the present time (Pedersen, Clarke, Dudgeon & Griffiths, 2005).

There is a great deal of research indicating that Indigenous Australians suffer from many disadvantages because of the colonization of Australia (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision [SCRGSP], 2005). Additionally, levels of prejudice against Indigenous Australians in the community are unacceptably high (e.g., Mellor, 2003; Pedersen, Beven, Walker & Griffiths, 2004). The prevalence of negative attitudes found in these surveys may well be an under-estimate of the true position in the community given that respondents with university degrees are somewhat over-represented in community samples (many surveys find a negative relationship between education and prejudice). There is little Australian research which investigates the effect of the perception of prejudice by marginalised groups on their later life. However, in
one study regarding the perception of prejudice by Indigenous Australians, it was found that these effects were profound and long-lasting (South Australian Health Commission, 1991). Results from this study indicated that the perception of hostility from the outside community was significantly related to mental health problems, suicidal behaviour, non-prescribed drug use, police problems, and prison experiences among this marginalised group.

Asylum seekers are another group that has been at the forefront of public debate in recent years. In the Australian context, refugees are usually accepted as such after they have applied through official channels overseas. Asylum seekers are people making a claim for refugee status after having arrived on these shores without authorisation. Their status has then to be determined; they are usually refugees but are not recognised as such at this stage. Many asylum seekers are from the Middle East; the two main nationalities of asylum seekers in 1998 to 2001 were Iraqis and Afghans (Refugee Council of Australia, 2002). With respect to attitudes toward asylum seekers, there is a great deal of research indicating that community levels of rejection are also unacceptably high (e.g., Klocker, 2004; Klocker & Dunn, 2003; Pedersen, Attwell & Heveli, 2005; Saxton, 2003; Schweitzer, Perkoulidis, Krome, Ludlow, & Ryan, 2005). Relevantly, attitudes toward Australian asylum seekers are related to hostile societal norms (Louis, Duck, Terry, Schuller, & Lalonde, 2007). As occurs with Indigenous Australians, the mental health of asylum seekers is of great concern (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2001; Steele, Silove, Brooks, Momartin, Alzuhairi, & Susljik, 2004). It is likely that these mental health problems are a consequence of procedures encountered in Australia.
such as mandatory detention for up to seven years (arguably a form of institutionalized racism), coupled with trauma experienced before arrival.

The research referred to above provides evidence of the prevalence of negative attitudes toward both Indigenous Australians and asylum seekers. However, the extent to which people holding these attitudes believe that their views are representative of the wider community has not been addressed. And we know that the beliefs that people hold about the extent to which their views are shared by others in the community can have significant social implications. For example, Miller (1993) found that participants who believed - in fact falsely - that they had the support of the majority for their preferred means of resolving a conflict over land usage were opposed to reaching a compromise with others in their community who preferred alternative means of resolving the conflict. Also, Bauman and Geher (2002-2003) provide many instances of the relationship between perceptions of support for one’s attitudes and behavioural intentions (e.g., abortion and euthanasia). Together, the evidence suggests that how much people overestimate support impacts on how likely it is that they will engage in certain acts.

There is a growing body of literature that being provided with consensus information that differs from one’s own perception modifies people’s attitudes (Sechrist, & Stangor, 2001; Stangor, Sechrist & Jost, 2001; Tan, Tan, Tatyana, Crandall, Fukushi, Nyandwi, Chin, & Wu, 2001; Wittenbrink & Henly, 1996). (A very useful overview of the relevant research from a social norms perspective has been provided by Berkowitz, 2004, on a wide range of issues such as teenage drinking, gambling and smoking). This perspective posits that people’s behaviour is influenced by their perceptions of what other members of their social group think and do. Yet these perceptions are not always
accurate (see Berkowitz, 2004). Clearly, perception of the support, or lack of it, has important consequences. Specifically, questions about the factors involved in the assessment of consensus, as well as the extent to which people overestimate or underestimate consensus, need to be addressed.

Researchers have adopted two approaches when examining the theoretical and practical issues in this area. The first approach is the False Consensus Effect (FCE) where the extent to which people holding a particular view estimate that they have community support is compared with the support for that position estimated by those who hold an opposing view (Ross, Greene & House, 1977). The FCE has been found across a wide variety of opinions, attitudes, and behavioural choices (Mullen, Atkins, Champion, Edwards, Hardy, Story, & Vanderklock, 1985). There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that people holding a particular attitude believe that they have more support for their position than is believed by those holding an opposing view. This is obviously an important observation, but research focused on just the FCE does not provide any information at all about the accuracy of the assessments that are made. All that these studies demonstrate is that people holding contrasting views on some issue significantly underestimate the support that their opponents believe they have for their position. The brief remarks made above about the consequences of misperception apply much more strongly to the issue of accuracy of perception of the community’s position than it does to the FCE.

The second approach applied has been to assess the accuracy of perception of consensus. The circumstances under which people tend to over-estimate or under-estimate the degree to which others agree with them have been investigated in a number
of studies. One important factor in this field of research is the type of characteristic of the individual that is being investigated. Specifically, it has been established that estimation of consensus is very much influenced by whether abilities and skills, or attitudes and opinions, are the focus of the investigation. Both Campbell (1986) and Jones (2004) have claimed that respondents overestimate consensus for their opinions, attitudes and their low abilities, but underestimate consensus for their high abilities. The argument is that if you are not good at something, it is reassuring to believe that many others are not good at it (false consensus) but if you are good at something it bolsters your ego if you believe that only a few other people are as good as you (false uniqueness). In the present paper, however, our concern is exclusively with attitudes, and particularly with attitudes toward members of out-groups.

There have been specific factors that have mediated the FCE (Marks & Miller, 1987) and, by implication, accuracy of perception of consensus. Very broadly, these factors may be classified as either cognitive (i.e., making sense or interpreting one's experiences) or motivational (i.e., defending one's beliefs and/or protecting one's self-image). As Biernat, Manis and Kobrynowicz (1997) point out, the most common cognitive factor is selective exposure. People tend to associate with those who are similar to themselves, and assume that they and their associates are representative of the wider community. This is very likely to lead them to overestimate the percentage in the population who share their opinions and attitudes. Conversely, the motivational explanation argues that individuals may be motivated to believe that most others are like themselves in order to justify and validate the correctness of their own position. This, however, would depend on people accepting that their views are questionable, and in
need of defence. Recent investigations concerned with errors in perception of consensus give consideration to both the cognitive and motivational explanations (e.g., Koestner, 1995).

Overview of our research. In the public and political domains, as well as in interpersonal relations, misperceptions of consensus may have important practical consequences (Berkowitz, 2004). There are very few studies of racial or ethnic attitudes that have examined accuracy of perceived support for such attitudes, and to the best of our knowledge, there have been no studies that have examined these phenomena with respect to attitudes toward Indigenous Australians or asylum seekers. If those who have a negative attitude toward these out-groups believe themselves to be in the majority, this may well have important consequences for attempts to reduce prejudice in the community. There is some evidence to suggest that those who believe themselves to be in the majority are more vocal and more inflexible than those who are not (Miller, 1993).

The primary aim of the present study was to assess the accuracy with which respondents were able to estimate community support for their position. In so doing, we sought to understand whether respondents (a) generally overestimate consensus for their respective positions in line with the FCE, (b) become more rejecting of out-groups as their estimates of community support increase, and (c) if there is a difference in accuracy when comparing respondents holding more negative attitudes, versus those endorsing more positive attitudes toward the out-groups in line with the motivational accounts of the FCE.
Method.

Procedure/Participants

The present data are taken from a larger survey (see Pedersen, Watt & Hansen, 2006; Pedersen, Dudgeon, Watt, & Griffiths, 2006). A total sample of 2,400, made up of 800 residents from each of three Western Australian locations, Albany, Kalgoorlie and Perth, was randomly selected from the 2004 telephone directories. Albany is a rural centre, Kalgoorlie is a regional city based on the gold-mining industry, and Perth is the capital city of Western Australia. Indigenous Australians make up approximately 2.7% of Albany’s population, 6.3% of Kalgoorlie’s population, and 1.5% of Perth’s population. Questionnaires were mailed in 2004 to potential respondents with a covering letter, and two weeks later a reminder letter was mailed. Respondents were not contacted in any other way. Perth and Kalgoorlie were chosen as these two locations had been used in previous research (Pedersen, Contos, Griffiths, Bishop, & Walker, 2000) and Albany was chosen because of the high proportion of previous asylum seekers (now refugees) who live there. The response rates from Albany, Kalgoorlie, and Perth were 35%, 21% and 30% respectively.

In total, 653 people sent in completed questionnaires. There was only one Indigenous person who responded to the questionnaire; her data were excluded from the Indigenous analysis. Given the extremely small number of asylum seekers in Australia, and the unlikelihood of their receiving a random survey, all participants’ data were used for the asylum seeker analysis.

After cross-checking our sample’s characteristics, we found no significant difference among the three locations with respect to such variables as education and sex.
The only demographic that varied was age: the average age in Albany was 57 years, the average age in Kalgoorlie was 46 years, and the average age in Perth was 54 years. All these differences were statistically significant. Overall, 22% of the participants held a Bachelor Degree or higher. These figures are not significantly different from the population figure of 18% provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2001).

Although there were slightly more females (54%) than males (46%), this difference was of little importance; although it was statistically significant with some analyses, it was not in others, depending on the number of participants. Because the relationship between gender and the other variables of interest was so slight, gender differences were not considered in the following analyses. The standard error of the mean of the attitude scales was 0.05 in both cases indicating that obtained means were very good estimates of the means in the population from which they were drawn. Thus, generally speaking, our respondents appeared to come from all walks of life and be representative of the population of Western Australia.

**Measures**

**Attitudes toward Indigenous Australians** (the “ATIA” scale). This was measured by an 18-item scale (Pedersen et al., 2004). Items were responded to on a seven-point Likert scale (1= 'disagree strongly' to 7 = 'agree strongly'). The scale is reported to be reliable with reliabilities of $\alpha = 0.91$ and $\alpha = 0.92$ respectively in two separate studies reported in the Pedersen et al. (2004) study. Reverse scoring was used to recode positively worded items so that for all items a higher score indicated a more negative attitude. An example
from the ATIA scale is “Aboriginal people have no regard for their own or anybody else’s property”.

**Attitudes toward Asylum Seekers** (the “ATAS” scale). This was measured by an 18-item scale (Pedersen, Attwell & Heveli, 2005). Items were responded to on a seven-point Likert scale (1= 'disagree strongly' to 7 = 'agree strongly'). The scale is reported to be reliable with an internal reliability of $\alpha = 0.94$ in the above study. Again, reverse coding was used on positively worded items so that the higher the score, the higher the negative attitude. An example from the ATAS scale is “If asylum seekers are not happy, send them home”.

**Perception of Consensus.**

Consensus has been measured in a number of different ways. The method we have chosen is similar to that used by Kenworthy and Miller (2001) who asked participants about their opinion on capital punishment, and then asked how many people they believed agreed with them. Similarly, we asked our participants for their attitudes toward Indigenous Australians and asylum seekers, and then asked them how many people they thought would agree or disagree with their views. All respondents were asked the following questions after completion of the relevant attitude scales:

**General consensus question:** “It is likely that some Australians would agree with the views that you have just expressed about Australian Aborigines and Aboriginal issues (asylum seekers and issues relating to them), while others would disagree. Generally speaking, what percentage of Australians do you think would agree or disagree with your views?”
Specific consensus question: “What about the views of people known to you (e.g., friends or family)? Generally speaking, what percentage of people known to you do you think would agree or disagree with your views?

Percentage of people known to you who would agree with your views __ %
Percentage of people known to you who would disagree with your views __ %
(Note: these percentages should add up to 100%)

Socio-demographics. Respondents were asked to state their age in years, their education level (1 = primary school only, 5 = university), and sex (1 = female, 2 = male).

Results

First, we calculated how many participants scored above the midpoint of the ATIA and ATAS scale as per previous research (e.g., Pedersen, Attwell, & Heveli, 2005). Results indicated that 67.8% of participants scored above the midpoint on the ATIA, and 73.5% scored above the midpoint on the ATAS. However, given that the principal analyses to be reported here focus on accuracy of perception, we chose to make the analysis more fine-grained and divide our categories by seven rather than two. Accuracy of perception was computed as the difference between the percentage of people within the community at each level of the respective attitude and the respondent’s estimate of the percentage of Australians who would agree with their view. This required that attitude categories be
created so that we could estimate percent of respondents in each category and their responses. The categories used in our analyses correspond with the seven-point Likert scale used for the ATAS and ATIA, where: 1 = strongly positive (scale score less than or equal to 1.5), 2 = moderately positive (scale score greater than 1.5 and less than or equal to 2.5), 3 = slightly positive (scale score greater than 2.5 and less than or equal to 3.5), 4 = neutral (scale score greater than 3.5 and less than or equal to 4.5), 5 = slightly negative (scale score greater than 4.5 and less than or equal to 5.5), 6 = moderately negative (scale score greater than 5.5 and less than or equal to 6.5), 7 = strongly negative (scale score greater than 6.5).

The number of people in each category was computed, and this was subtracted from each respondent’s estimate of the percentage of Australians who would agree with their view. For example, a respondent who was placed in the ‘moderately positive attitude’ category and estimated that 43% of Australians would agree with his or her views would have over-estimated community support by 34% because the actual percentage of those in the wider community who had a moderately positive attitude was 9%. It should be noted that before proceeding to the analyses reported below, possible covariates were considered where appropriate. Correlations between possible covariates and relevant DVs were judged to be of insufficient magnitude to be of any value (see Table 1 for correlation matrix).

(Insert Table 1 about here)
Attitudes Toward Indigenous Australians. Consistent with past research, the ATIA showed good internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.91$). The means and standard deviations of the ATIA scores for the total sample and for each location are shown in Table 2 along with the percentage of respondents in each of the seven categories.

(Insert Table 2 about here)

Overall difference in mean scores between the locations was significant ($F(2,646) = 5.57, p = .01$). Scheffe’s test indicated that the Kalgoorlie respondents scored higher on the ATIA compared with those from Perth, but that there were no other significant differences. However, the percentage of respondents within each of the seven categories did not differ significantly across locations ($\chi^2(12, N = 649) = 17.17, p > .05$).

Accuracy of Perception. We assessed the accuracy with which respondents were able to estimate community support for their position on the ATIA. Means of estimation of community support, means of estimates of support by people known to the respondents, and actual means of respondents in each of the seven categories are shown in Table 3.

(Insert Table 3 about here)

Estimates of community support by respondents in each of the seven categories were significantly greater than the support for their position represented by the ‘actual’ figures. It was also found that as respondents became more negative in their attitude
toward Indigenous Australians, their estimation of community support for their position increased in a linear fashion \(F(1,651) = 449.99\) \(p < .001\) for the linear trend). Eta squared \((0.93)\) indicated that this linear relationship was very strong indeed. Almost 93% of the variability among these estimates can be represented by a straight line.

The extent to which these estimates differed from the actual community support (i.e. were over-estimates) similarly increased as respondents became more negative in their attitude. Those in the three positive attitude categories estimated that 43% of the community shared their views on Indigenous Australians, whereas those in the three negative attitude categories estimated that their views were shared by 75% of those in the wider community.

The fact that respondents recognised that those known to them were more similar than members of the wider community in their attitudes to Indigenous Australians can be seen by comparing the appropriate estimates of support. The respective overall means were 69.9% and 60.9% \(t(652) = 13.95, p < .001\).

**Attitudes Toward Asylum Seekers.** Consistent with past research, the ATAS showed good internal reliability \((\alpha = 0.93)\). ATAS scores were used to place respondents into the seven categories using the same procedure as for the ATIA scores. The means and standard deviations of the ATAS scores for the total sample and for each location are shown in Table 1 along with the percentage of respondents in each of the categories.

Differences among the mean scores on the ATAS across locations were not significant \(F(2,646) = 1.126, p = \text{n.s.}\), nor did the percentage of respondents within
each of the seven categories differ significantly across locations ($\chi^2(12, N = 649) = 5.33, p = n.s.$).

**Accuracy of Perception.**

Means of estimation of community support, means of estimates of support by people known to the respondents, over-estimation of support and actual means of respondents in each of the seven categories are shown in Table 1.

Estimates of community support by respondents in each of the seven attitude categories were significantly greater than the support for their position represented by the ‘actual’ figures. As was the case with attitudes toward Indigenous Australians, it was observed that when respondents became more negative in their attitude toward asylum seekers their estimation of community support for their position increased in a linear fashion ($F(1,652) = 328.75, p < .001$ for the linear trend). Eta squared (0.99) indicated that this linear relationship was extremely strong. Virtually all of the variability among these estimates can be explained by a straight line.

The extent to which these estimates differed from actual community support similarly increased as respondents became more negative in their attitude. Those in the positive attitude categories estimated that 46% of those in the community held views on asylum seekers that were similar to their own. Those in the negative attitude categories estimated that they had the support of 71% of the wider community.

As was the case with attitudes toward Indigenous Australians respondents estimated that a greater percentage of people known to them would agree with their views on asylum seekers than would members of the general community. The respective
overall means were 69.4% and 61.9% \((t(652) = 14.89, p < .001)\). It is clear that respondents are aware that those known to them are more similar to themselves than are those in the wider Australian community.

**Discussion.**

The main findings with respect to attitudes toward Indigenous Australians and asylum seekers, and the accuracy with which respondents estimated support for their attitudes, will be discussed and followed by some comments of the practical implications of this research.

**Attitudes toward Indigenous Australians and asylum seekers.** The primary focus of this research was to examine the extent to which respondents overestimated community agreement with their views, but before considering this issue some comments about attitudes expressed toward Indigenous Australians and asylum seekers may be useful. If those in the first three categories of ATIA scores are considered to have a positive attitude toward Indigenous Australians, they represent somewhat less than a third of sample. Kalgoorlie respondents were more rejecting than those from the Perth metropolitan area but the general impression that one gets from these results as a whole is that there is still a long way to go before Indigenous Australians are accepted by the majority of other Australians. In addition, these findings indicate the need to take into account location differences when implementing anti-racism strategies (also see Dunn & McDonald, 2001; Pedersen et al., 2000; Pedersen, Walker & Wise, 2005). At the very
least, it would be useful for people attempting to implement anti-racist strategies to know that some locations may need more attention than others.

Attitudes toward asylum seekers were even less positive than toward Indigenous Australians. Only 26% of the respondents indicated some acceptance of asylum seekers (that is, in the first three categories of the ATAS scores). It should be pointed out that very few Australians have had any interactions, either direct or indirect, with asylum seekers and that therefore attitudes toward members of this out-group would seem to be based almost entirely on reports presented in the mass media. It is quite clear that the Government’s position on asylum seekers is that those who do not arrive through official channels are not welcome. These asylum seekers are frequently described as ‘illegal immigrants’ (Klocker, 2004; Pedersen, Watt & Hansen, 2006; Saxton, 2003) although there is no law, national or international, that they have broken (Einfeld, 2002). It has been argued, for example by Deen (2003), that these factors have generated what can be described as ‘Islamophobia’ given that many asylum seekers are seen as Muslim. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that so many Australians have a negative attitude toward those who have sought asylum in this country.

**Accuracy of Perception.** With respect to both Indigenous Australians and asylum seekers, respondents in all of the seven categories estimated community support for their views to be significantly greater than was actually the case. We would suggest that the most interesting and potentially important finding was that, as attitudes toward these two out-groups became more negative, estimates of community support for their position became progressively greater in a strictly linear fashion. That this does not in fact reflect
the real situation in the community at large can be seen by an inspection of the ‘actual’ figures. While it is true that as attitudes decline from ‘very positive’ to ‘slightly positive’ the percentage of the population in these categories does increase, but as the attitudes becomes more negative, the percentage of the population in the three relevant categories progressively decreases producing a curvilinear relationship. Overestimation for both out-groups (i.e. the difference between estimated and actual support) increases in magnitude as the respondents’ attitudes become more negative.

How is one to account for the observation that both estimates and overestimates of support progressively increase as attitudes toward the two out-groups become more negative? One issue as previously noted is whether the media may lead people to believe that Australians are generally negative to both asylum seekers and to Indigenous Australians. Certainly, within the media there has been evidence of negativity toward both asylum seekers and Indigenous Australians. Thus, when people try to judge attitudes in the community in general they may think community attitudes are more negative than they really are. This would give another explanation of why people with negative attitudes thought there was more agreement with their stance than there really was. This becomes even more problematic when their views go unchallenged. As noted by Lawrence (2006), when a radio talk back announcer - or a politician for that matter - depicts minority groups in a hostile manner (the example Lawrence gave was Indigenous and Muslim Australians), and nobody disagrees, these views gain credibility.

Also, as mentioned in the introduction it has been argued that two major factors, cognitive and motivational, are involved in making estimates of consensus for one’s attitudes and opinions. According to the cognitive explanation, our estimates of the
extent to which our views are shared by the community at large are significantly
determined by what we perceive to be the views of those known to us. Generalising from
this selective exposure will almost always lead to a misperception of the situation in the
wider community. It is certainly the case that in our study respondents’ estimates of
community support for their views on Indigenous Australians and asylum seekers closely
paralleled estimates of support by those known to them. It is also evident that
respondents recognised that those known to them are more similar to themselves in
respect to these attitudes than are members of the general public. The difference between
these estimates suggests that respondents are aware of the influence of selective exposure
on their judgments and that they modify their estimates of community support
accordingly.

It might be assumed then that cognitive factors based on selective exposure provide
an adequate explanation for our results, but such an explanation does not answer the
question of why estimates of support both by those known to them and by the population
progressively increase as attitudes become more negative. It may be argued that
motivational factors provide a better explanation for the observation that estimates and
overestimates increase as attitudes become more negative. There is no good reason to
suppose that as a result of selective exposure respondents’ estimates of the extent to
which those known to them share their attitudes is any more accurate than their estimates
of community support. Berkowitz (2004) presents convincing evidence from a large
number of studies that misperception of the views of members of one’s social groups is a
common phenomenon. He reviewed research on pluralist ignorance and false consensus,
for example, to suggest that influences of those known to us are based more on what we
perceive their beliefs and attitudes to be rather than on what those beliefs and attitudes actually are. This evidence indicates that explanations for the increase in estimates of support as attitudes become more negative are required not only for the community findings, but also for the findings in respect to those known to the respondents. While perception of the attitude of those known to them is closely related to respondents’ estimates of the communities attitude, as would be expected on cognitive grounds, we suggest that cognitive factors alone are insufficient to account for our findings and that motivational factors need to be seriously considered.

Motivational explanations are based on the claim that in order to validate the correctness of one’s views and to maintain self-esteem one is motivated to perceive others as similar to oneself in relevant respects. This is especially the case when those views are questionable on moral or other grounds. In social norms theory, the distinction between descriptive and injunctive norms are considered to be of significance. Descriptive norms refer to the actual situation while injunctive norms refer to how things ought to be. There is a moral component, or at least a value judgment, associated with injunctive norms. It has been found by Borsari and Carey (2003), for example, that misperceptions are greater for injunctive norms than for descriptive ones. As prejudice is seen as socially and morally unacceptable in our society, those who are aware of their negative attitudes might feel the need to justify their position by exaggerating community consensus for their position to a greater extent than would be felt by those whose attitudes are more positive. In Australia’s seemingly ‘egalitarian’ society, there is a pressure to be accepting of others in a multicultural society and not to appear racist. Pedersen et al. (2004), for example, found that participants made comments such as “I am
not a racist, nor do I believe that any of the answers I have given have racist overtones, however ... “ A similar pattern occurred in the present study; for example: “I am not a racist of any nationality but I do think we are not helping by paying young Aboriginals to go to school etc.” and “I am not a racist person, but after having three very bad experiences involving aboriginal people, I find it very hard to have any positive feelings toward them. However there must be some half decent aboriginal people out there”. At some level many respondents, it seems, acknowledge to themselves that their attitudes may be interpreted as ‘racist’. It may be argued that by considerably overestimating the number of people in the community whose negative attitudes are similar to their own these respondents may feel more at ease with their own attitudes toward those out-groups. If this is the case then it would be expected that overestimation of support would increase as attitudes become more “unacceptably” negative. A case can therefore be made that a motivational explanation is appropriate for our finding that the magnitude of overestimation made by rejecting respondents is significantly greater than that made by the accepting respondents.

It may well be that both cognitive and motivational factors are involved in trying to judge how much support one has for one’s attitudes toward members of an out-group. Our results could be explained by speculating that cognitive and motivational factors operate differently depending on how morally defensible one finds one’s position to be. Those who are more accepting may be more affected by what they believe their friends’ and associates’ views are, while those whose attitude becomes more rejecting and therefore less morally defensible, may look for justification by progressively overestimating support as their rejection increases. If there is any substance to this
speculation then it would be expected that progressively increasing estimates of support for one’s views would be evident only when a negative attitude raises questions concerning the acceptability of such an attitude on moral or other grounds.

**Practical Implications.** Beliefs that individuals have about the prevalence of their attitudes and opinions can have critically important implications for the maintenance and extension of those attitudes and opinions and the behaviours that give expression to them. If one believes that negative attitudes toward Indigenous Australians and asylum seekers are unjustified or unhelpful in alleviating the plight of members of these out-groups, then a disturbing finding of our study was that those who had a negative attitude toward these groups perceive themselves to hold views that are also held by a large majority of other Australians. These findings are disturbing because there is firm evidence to indicate that those who perceive themselves to be in the majority are more forthright in expressing their attitudes and opinions, less prepared to compromise, and less likely to modify their views, than those who perceive themselves to be in the minority (Miller, 1993). They consequently have an influence that is disproportionate to their numbers. An additional consequence is that those who hold a contrary view may fall silent especially if, like our respondents with a positive attitude toward the out-groups, they perceive themselves to be in the minority.

In the Berkowitz (2004) review, it was demonstrated that, by informing individuals of the extent to which they misperceived the actual situation, the attitudes and behaviors of these individuals was changed in a positive direction. Social norms-based programs are effective when individuals are shown that they have misperceived the
attitudes and behaviours of significant others. When information about the actual situation was provided, those who wrongly believed that their position was held by the majority and those who wrongly believed themselves to be in the minority modified their views and behaviours in the predicted direction. A social norms approach may be applicable with respect to modifying the negative attitudes where those with a negative attitude are in the minority, but would be inappropriate with respect to groups where those with negative attitudes are in the majority. In the present study, participants who held positive views about either out-group were in the minority. To inform them of the actual situation would be more likely to consolidate their views than otherwise, and may be especially discouraging. Berkowitz (2004), however, points out that a social norms approach can be focused on universal prevention directed at all members of the group, selective prevention directed at a broad subset of members of a group, or indicated prevention directed at those individuals whose attitude or behaviour is particularly inappropriate. Selective prevention might be useful if focused on those in the community who hold negative attitudes toward Indigenous Australians. The difficulties in conducting an indicated prevention program would, of course, be very considerable indeed. While one of the practical implications of this study is that the social norms approach needs to be undertaken with careful consideration of the target of the attitude, several important factors that contribute to having a negative attitude toward out-groups have been identified in previous studies (see, for example, Pedersen, Clarke, Dudgeon, & Griffiths, 2005). False beliefs about Indigenous issues and asylum seekers have been shown to be quite widely held and are significantly related to negative attitudes. Changing misperceptions about consensus may helpful where appropriate but attempting to change
false beliefs may be another effective means of changing attitudes toward the out-groups in our study.

Some of the limitations of this study need to be held in mind when our findings are being considered. The response rate, particularly from Kalgoorlie, was quite low. However, we checked age and education of the respondents but were not able to find any important differences between these sample characteristics and the Australian population. It needs to be noted that, at best, the population referred to is that of the South Western corner of Western Australia. Our findings need to be tested by replications in other contexts. However, there is no reason to believe that our findings are restricted to this sample.

In conclusion, Indigenous Australians and asylum seekers are not accepted by many Australian citizens. We found that as respondents became more rejecting of members of these out-groups, their estimates of community support for their attitudes progressively increased. As noted, our findings require replication, but we believe that if this observation is confirmed it will apply most strongly to those attitudes where, on moral or other grounds, holding a negative attitude is less defensible than a positive one. In future research, it ought not to be too difficult to put this speculation to the test by selecting attitudes that vary in respect to the moral component.
References.


Table 2. Attitude scale descriptives by location splitting sample 7-ways from strongly positive to strongly negative

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>N of participants</th>
<th>Mean(SD)</th>
<th>(Positive)</th>
<th>(Negative)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1   2  3  4 5  6  7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATIA</td>
<td>649</td>
<td>4.16(1.27)</td>
<td>1.4% 10.3% 19.1% 27.9% 27.2% 12.2% 1.9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perth</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>3.97 (1.25)</td>
<td>1.3% 12.0% 23.1% 30.7% 21.8% 10.2% 0.9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalgoorlie</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>4.41 (1.24)</td>
<td>0.7% 7.8% 16.3% 24.8% 30.7% 17.6% 2.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albany</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>4.17 (1.30)</td>
<td>1.9% 10.4% 17.4% 27.4% 29.6% 10.7% 2.6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATAS</td>
<td>649</td>
<td>4.37(1.38)</td>
<td>3.4% 9.4% 12.6% 23.9% 27.9% 20.0% 2.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perth</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>4.44 (1.40)</td>
<td>3.5% 8.8% 11.9% 21.7% 28.8% 22.6% 2.7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalgoorlie</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>4.43 (1.32)</td>
<td>2.0% 8.5% 12.4% 26.1% 28.1% 20.9% 2.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albany</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>4.27 (1.41)</td>
<td>4.1% 10.4% 13.3% 24.4% 27.0% 17.4% 3.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. 1: strongly positive toward the out-groups; 7 is strongly negative toward the out-groups
Table 1

Correlation Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. ATIA</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.60*</td>
<td>0.59*</td>
<td>0.50*</td>
<td>0.51*</td>
<td>0.16*</td>
<td>-0.12*</td>
<td>-0.30*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. ATAS</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.47*</td>
<td>0.41*</td>
<td>0.60*</td>
<td>0.56*</td>
<td>0.11*</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>-0.27*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Consensus Indigenous community</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.75*</td>
<td>0.64*</td>
<td>0.58*</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.19*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Consensus Indigenous friends/family</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.53*</td>
<td>0.64*</td>
<td>-0.14*</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.27*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Consensus asylum seeker community</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.78*</td>
<td>0.17*</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>-0.17*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Consensus asylum seeker friends/family</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.13*</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>-0.15*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Age</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-0.20*</td>
<td>-0.18*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Sex</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-0.05*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Education</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .01 (all two-tailed)
Table 3: Accuracy of estimation of community support.

**Attitudes toward Indigenous Australians**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitude category</th>
<th>Estimate of Support (A)</th>
<th>Estimate of Support (K)</th>
<th>Actual</th>
<th>Difference</th>
<th>Significance *</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (strongly +ve)</td>
<td>28.9%</td>
<td>55.6%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
<td>t(df = 8) = 8.95*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (moderately +ve)</td>
<td>36.3%</td>
<td>48.1%</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>26.0%</td>
<td>t(df = 66) = 12.83*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (slightly +ve)</td>
<td>47.1%</td>
<td>52.0%</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
<td>27.9%</td>
<td>t(df = 124) = 16.71*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (neutral)</td>
<td>59.9%</td>
<td>66.6%</td>
<td>28.1%</td>
<td>31.8%</td>
<td>t(df = 182) = 24.71*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 (slightly -ve)</td>
<td>74.1%</td>
<td>85.2%</td>
<td>27.1%</td>
<td>47.0%</td>
<td>t(df = 176) = 45.15*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 (moderately -ve)</td>
<td>79.0%</td>
<td>89.7%</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
<td>66.9%</td>
<td>t(df = 78) = 44.76*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 (strongly -ve)</td>
<td>69.2%</td>
<td>79.0%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>67.4%</td>
<td>t(df = 11) = 8.49*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Attitudes toward Asylum Seekers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitude category</th>
<th>Estimate of Support (A)</th>
<th>Estimate of Support (K)</th>
<th>Actual</th>
<th>Difference</th>
<th>Significance *</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (strongly +ve)</td>
<td>37.11</td>
<td>49.74</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>33.71</td>
<td>t(df = 21) = 8.95*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (moderately +ve)</td>
<td>43.17</td>
<td>49.92</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>33.87</td>
<td>t(df = 60) = 12.87*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (slightly +ve)</td>
<td>49.76</td>
<td>55.91</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>36.86</td>
<td>t(df = 83) = 18.71*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (neutral)</td>
<td>57.85</td>
<td>64.15</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>33.95</td>
<td>t(df = 155) = 27.56*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 (slightly -ve)</td>
<td>67.40</td>
<td>76.55</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>39.50</td>
<td>t(df = 181) = 35.02*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 (moderately -ve)</td>
<td>73.95</td>
<td>83.69</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>54.05</td>
<td>t(df = 129) = 48.00*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 (strongly -ve)</td>
<td>83.49</td>
<td>91.22</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>80.69</td>
<td>t(df = 17) = 30.27*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes
• “A”= Australians; “K”= People known to the respondent; “Actual” refers to the actual sample mean, “Difference” refers to difference between community estimate and actual support.
• 1: strongly positive toward the out-groups; 7 is strongly negative toward the out-groups
• * all values significant beyond .01 level