

**Estimating group size: effects of category membership, differential construal and selective exposure**

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*Abstract*

*The present study investigates the role of category membership, differential construal and selective exposure in consensus estimation concerning a relatively involving social categorization, namely religion. Christians, differing in their degree of religious involvement, and non-believers were asked to estimate the percentage of Christians in the general population. Respondents were expected to construe the general category of Christians differentially as a function of their own (religious) behaviours. These differential construals were expected to mediate respondents' estimates. Further, selective exposure, i.e. the religious behaviours of friends and relatives, was expected to affect the estimates.*

*Results show a negative relationship between religious involvement and the estimated percentage of Christians, indicating a False Uniqueness Effect. As predicted, estimates were mediated by respondents' construal of the general category; involved Christians construed this category in more narrow terms than did the other two groups and that construal was related to lower consensus estimates. Further, selective exposure was positively related to consensus estimates. Thus, construal processes and selective exposure had opposing effects on respondents' consensus estimates.*

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## INTRODUCTION

There is a large body of evidence showing that people generally perceive their own characteristics, opinions and preferences as relatively common (Marks & Miller, 1987; Mullen, Atkins, Champion, Edwards, Hardy, Story, & Vanderklok, 1985). This False Consensus Effect (FCE, Ross, Greene, & House, 1977) occurs when a person, engaging in a given behaviour, estimates that behaviour to be shared by a larger proportion of the general population or a specific reference group than would be estimated by a person engaging in an alternative behaviour (*cf.* Mullen & Hu, 1988, p. 334). Both cognitive and motivational explanations have been put forward to account for the FCE.

Of the cognitive accounts for the FCE, selective exposure refers to the fact that people are generally surrounded by similar others (Bosveld, Koomen, & Van der Pligt, 1994; Sherman, Presson, Chassin, Corty, & Olshavsky, 1983). When asked to estimate the prevalence of a certain behaviour, these similar positions will easily come to mind, and will be generalized to a broader population. In a similar vein, the availability of own position will lead to relatively high estimates (Marks & Duval, 1991; Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). With respect to motivational accounts for the FCE, Marks and Miller (1987) refer to maintaining self-esteem and uncertainty reduction as possible explanations. Empirical support, however, for these motivational explanations is not overwhelming (see Deutsch, 1989; Mullen, 1983; Mullen *et al.*, 1985).

Although the FCE can be considered a robust and stable finding (Mullen *et al.*, 1985), some studies have shown a reversal of this effect, i.e. a False Uniqueness Effect (FUE<sup>1</sup>). This relative *underestimation* of the prevalence of one's own position was experimentally shown in a study by Mullen, Dovidio, Johnson, and Copper (1992), who found that subjects relatively underestimate the number of outgroup members, opting for their own choice. These authors explained these findings in terms of categorization strength, i.e. the extent to which group members are categorized as in- or outgroup members. Mullen *et al.*'s results show that when this categorization is strong, subjects relatively underestimate the prevalence of their own choices in estimates for an outgroup. A second demonstration of the FUE was provided by Suls, Wan, Barlow, and Heimberg (1990). These authors showed that subjects suffering from anxiety disorders underestimated the size of their own category (phobics) relative to estimates provided by subjects not suffering from these problems. Among the explanations for their findings Suls *et al.* refer to non-patients' tendency to perceive 'false positive uniqueness' ('few people share my mental health', *cf.* Suls *et al.*, p. 429), bolstering self-esteem. They further suggest that misunderstanding of the relevant disorders by non-patients may have affected their estimates; non-patients may assume that the social phobic's fears are not very different from their own mild anxieties. Finally, Frable (1993) showed that,

<sup>1</sup>As mentioned earlier by Mullen *et al.* (1992) some debate with respect to the term 'False Uniqueness' exists. For example, Suls and Wan (1987) refer to the underestimation of *actual* consensus as False Uniqueness, whereas the results of Suls *et al.* (1990) in which a relative underestimation of the size of the own category (phobics versus 'normals') was shown, were referred to as a 'relative uniqueness effect'. In the present study we will use Mullen *et al.*'s (1992) definition and refer to both the relative underestimation of the prevalence of own choices (Mullen *et al.*, 1992) and the relative underestimation of the size of a social category as a 'False Uniqueness Effect'.

especially people with culturally stigmatized and invisible conditions, such as gays or incest victims, perceive some of their own preferences (unrelated to these stigmatized characteristics) as relatively uncommon. This compared to people with culturally valued or stigmatized but visible conditions, such as the physically attractive or the obese. Frable (1993) argues that because people with invisible stigmatized conditions do not easily see others who share their condition, they must conclude that they are unique.

With respect to the explanations for the FCE and the FUE, it is important to note that most of the factors supposed to underlie the FCE cannot explain the FUE and *vice versa*. However, as suggested by Bosveld, Koomen, Van der Pligt and Plaisier (1995) one of the mechanisms that may provide such an integrative framework can be differential construal (e.g. Gilovich, 1990; Griffin & Ross, 1991; Ross *et al.*, 1977). This approach suggests that people, holding different positions with respect to an object, may partly do so because they construe the object in different terms. For example, as shown by Gilovich (1990), subjects with a preference for 'recent films' tended to construe this category in more positive terms than subjects who did not like this category of films. Further, Gilovich showed that these different construals were associated with different consensus estimates, more positive construals leading to higher estimates of consensus than more negative construals. However, whereas Gilovich has shown the relevance of construal processes for the occurrence of a FCE, Bosveld *et al.* (1995) showed that construal processes may also explain a FUE. In their study subjects were primed with positive or negative construals of the category of stand-up comedians, and it was shown that when they provided estimates for reference groups that were associated with negative construals (e.g. elderly) a FUE occurred, whereas a FCE occurred when they provided estimates for reference groups associated with positive construals (e.g. students, yuppies). Thus, it is suggested that the occurrence of the FCE and the FUE may be dependent upon the match between construal and expectations or knowledge about reference groups.

In the present study we elaborate on this line of reasoning by suggesting that differential construal, together with expectations or information about actual distributions may explain a FUE on the basis of category membership. In a preliminary study (Bosveld, 1992) two groups of Christians, one that attended church frequently, and one that attended church less frequently or never, and a group of non-believers<sup>2</sup> were asked to estimate the percentage of Christians in The Netherlands. It was shown that the group of frequent church attendees estimated a smaller percentage of Christians than did the other two groups, indicating a FUE. It needs to be added however, that this effect was suppressed by the effect of selective exposure, a factor that related positively to subjects' estimates.

Regarding differential construal of the criteria of group membership, one may assume that involved group members showing more extreme group behaviours will tend to define membership in terms of their typical behaviours. Less involved or more marginal members, on the other hand, will almost necessarily define membership in terms of their (less extreme) behaviours. So, it is predicted that Christian subjects may use their own behaviours to construe category membership. That is, it is expected that involved Christians may construe a Christian as someone

<sup>2</sup>In this study, as in the main study reported in this article, respondents that indicated not to have any religion were classified as non-believers.

that frequently attends church, puts his or her children in a Christian school etc., whereas a less involved Christian may apply less strict standards. This strategy of applying one's own standards as a boundary for group membership may be considered as caused by the same mechanisms as those underlying the FCE, cognitive factors may play a role, but motivational factors may also contribute (see Dunning and Cohen (1992) for a motivational account of the tendency to apply one's own performance for setting qualification criteria). Non-believers, on the other hand, will probably be rather similar to less involved Christians and accept less strict standards for membership. These subjects will base their standards on the behaviours of the great majority of Christians. Together, it is predicted that involved Christians will construe the category of Christians in more 'narrow' terms, that is, they may consider relevant attributes as more necessary for being a Christian than less involved Christians and non-believers. However, as suggested earlier, in order to predict a FUE it is assumed that subjects compare their construal of the relevant category with expectations about reference groups (see Bosveld *et al.*, 1995; Nisbett & Kunda, 1985; Spears & Manstead, 1989) or with social knowledge about more general populations. Since this type of knowledge is supposed to be shared by different groups of people (i.e. most people are aware of the declining number of church attendees), comparison between individual construal and this information predicts that the more one considers, for example, church attendance as necessary for being a Christian, the less Christians one may estimate. Thus, it is predicted that the FUE, shown earlier in a study on estimates of the number of Christians may, at least partly, be explained by a comparison between subjects' construal of the category of Christians, with expectations or knowledge about the relevant population.

Whereas the differential construal approach to consensus estimation may offer an explanation for the FUE, one important factor related to consensus estimation, i.e. selective exposure (see Bosveld *et al.*, 1994; Sherman *et al.*, 1983), cannot be disregarded in the present study. Although selective exposure does not offer an explanation for the FUE, it is considered a major factor affecting consensus estimates and may be of special relevance for domains that have cultural or political significance, such as religion. Similar to, for example, people's political views, one may expect clustering on the basis of religious convictions; religious people will associate with other religious people, whereas non-religious people may have more friends and relatives sharing their views. Accordingly, as was referred to earlier, people may use these positions of similar others in forming consensus estimates. Thus, although a FUE may be expected in estimates relating to the size of religious categories, selective exposure to similar others may act as a counter force against perceptions of uniqueness.

Two other factors, possibly related to consensus estimation and category membership are also examined in the present study, namely identification with Christians and the uniqueness ascribed to Christians. Although there is hardly any empirical evidence that these factors affect consensus estimates (see for example Mullen *et al.*, 1985, 1992), religion as a basis for intergroup categorization may have strong effects on people's feelings of identification and uniqueness (see Brewer, 1991; Mullen *et al.*, 1992). These feelings of identification and uniqueness may affect social categorization processes that in turn influence consensus estimates.

In sum, the present study focuses on the underlying processes in consensus estimation with respect to an important social category, religion. On the basis of results from an earlier study in this domain we will test whether Christians and especially involved Christians relatively underestimate the size of their own category, a finding that may be mediated by respondents' construal of this category. The role of selective exposure affecting consensus estimates will also be investigated. Finally, we will address the relative contribution of identification and uniqueness in these processes.

## **METHOD**

### **Overview**

Respondents, living in a suburban Amsterdam neighbourhood, were approached at home. They were asked whether they were willing to complete a questionnaire on religion in the Netherlands. Questionnaires were collected two days later. The questionnaire started with an estimation task in which estimates for the percentage of Christians and 'non-Christians' in the Netherlands were asked. Then, 14 questions relating to the construal of Christians were asked. Next, identification with Christians was measured, followed by four questions with respect to the uniqueness of Christians. Further, respondents were asked to name three relatives and three friends and to answer some questions concerning these persons' religiosity. Then, respondents were asked to complete some personal questions with respect to their religiosity, followed by two estimation tasks, in which they were asked to estimate the percentage of frequent church attendees and the percentage of baptized Christians. Finally, respondents were asked to indicate their sex, age and education. On a final page, respondents could give their comments on the questionnaire.

### **Respondents**

Ninety-five respondents, 42 men, 40 women and 13 who did not indicate their sex completed the questionnaire. Of these respondents, 54 reported to be Christians and 40 reported to be non-believers. Twenty-six of the Christians said they were Roman Catholic, 28 reported being Protestant. One respondent reported being Jewish. This subject was deleted from the analyses.

### **Measures**

The questionnaire started with an introduction in which respondents were requested to answer the questions without the help of family-members or friends. They were asked not to use any other sources, such as an encyclopaedia. Finally, respondents were asked to complete the questionnaire in the order in which questions were presented.

*Estimates*

Respondents first read an example in which the estimation task was explained. After that, they were asked to estimate the percentage of Christians and non-Christians in the Netherlands, such that the total summed to 100 per cent.

In the second part of the questionnaire respondents were asked to estimate the percentage of people in the Netherlands going to church on a regular basis and baptized Christians in the Netherlands.

*Construal*

Respondents were first asked to write down in their own words how they would describe a Christian to someone unfamiliar with this term. This task was added in order to activate the construal, held by each respondent. Next, they were asked to indicate the extent to which each of 14 criteria is necessary for being a Christian. These criteria were derived from a pilot study in which 14 Christians and non-Christians were asked to write down what they considered a Christian. Five of these criteria referred to religious and moral matters, for example: 'Believing in life hereafter is' (1) not at all necessary—(7) strictly necessary for being a Christian; 'Living according to the 10 commandments is ...'; 'Seeing the difference between good and evil is ...'. Nine of the criteria referred to typical Christian behaviours. These were 'Reading the Bible on a regular basis is ...'; 'Attending church frequently is ...'. Factor analysis on these 14 questions revealed one major factor with an eigenvalue of 6.29 and two small factors with eigenvalues of slightly above 1. These two factors were not included in the analyses. The nine criteria that measured the necessity of specific behavioural activities for being a Christian such as attending church, reading the Bible and saying daily prayers loaded highly on the first factor (see footnote 3 for these nine criteria). In the analyses a composite score based on these nine questions was used and will be referred to hereafter as 'construal'.

*Identification*

Identification with Christians was measured by four questions: (1) 'I feel hindered by Christians'; (2) 'I fit in well with Christians'; (3) 'I consider Christians to be an important group'; (4) 'I feel strong ties with Christians'. All four questions were rated on a scale, ranging from 1 (very much disagree) to 7 (very much agree). Internal consistency (coefficient alpha) of these questions was 0.88 when the first question was left out. A composite measure was computed on the basis of questions 2, 3 and 4;

<sup>3</sup>Reading the Bible on a regular basis is ...; 'Attending church frequently is ...'; 'A daily prayer is ...'; 'Putting one's children into a Christian school is ...'; 'Being a church member of a church is ...'; 'Being baptized is ...'; 'Having a church wedding is ...'; 'No cursing is ...'; 'Respecting Sunday's rest is ...'.

*Uniqueness*

Uniqueness was measured by the following four questions: (1) 'Christians form a special group'; (2) 'Christians are chosen'; (3) 'Christians form a unique group'; (4) 'Christians clearly differ from other people'. These were rated on a scale, ranging from 1 (very much disagree) to 7 (very much agree). Leaving the second question out yielded an internal consistency (coefficient alpha) of 0.77. A composite measure was computed on the basis of questions 1, 3 and 4.

*Selective exposure*

Respondents were first asked to write down the initials of six people, preferably three relatives and three friends. On the next page, they were then asked to indicate for each of the persons mentioned, whether he or she was a believer, and whether he or she went to church on a regular basis. On following pages, respondents were asked for every person mentioned to indicate the extent to which they considered this person a Christian on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). Subjects thus received three scores: (a) the number of believers mentioned, (b) the number of church-attendees mentioned and (c) the mean score of the extent to which these others were perceived as Christians. Internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) was 0.89 and a composite measure on these three scores was computed.

*Category membership*

Respondents were divided in three groups on the basis of their category membership and church attendance. In a first question they indicated whether they had any religion (yes/no). Subjects that answered no were classified as non-believers. Respondents that answered yes were asked to indicate their religion in one of the following categories: Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim and 'other' (see also 'respondents'). The first group consisted of respondents that indicated attending church at least once in two weeks. The second group consisted of respondents that indicated attending church on a less regular basis and the third group consisted of non-believers. Hereafter we will refer to these groups as involved Christians, less involved Christians and non-believers.

**RESULTS**

Preliminary analyses showed that category membership did not relate significantly to sex, age, education. Further, involvement did not interact with type of religion. Therefore these variables were ignored in further analyses. Before analysing the relationships between category membership (i.e. involved Christians, less involved Christians and non-believers) and the factors, possibly mediating the effects of category membership on the estimates, we first analysed the effect of category membership on the estimated percentage of Christians. Involved Christians

estimated that 42.96 per cent of the population are Christians; less involved Christians 49.66 per cent, whereas non-believers estimated that 51.24 per cent belongs to this category. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated a marginally significant FUE,  $F_{lin}(1,93)=3.16$ ,  $p<0.10$ . This effect, however, may become stronger when the selective exposure factor is introduced, because, as was suggested in the introduction, both factors, category membership and selective exposure may have opposing effects and suppress each other.

First, however, we tested the effect of category membership on the four mediator variables, construal, identification, uniqueness and selective exposure (see Table 1). An analysis of variance showed a significant effect of category membership on the way in which respondents defined the category of Christians,  $F(2,91)=20.30$ ,  $p<0.001$ . Category membership also related significantly to identification,  $F(2,91)=26.39$ ,  $p<0.001$ . Further, a significant effect of category membership on perceived uniqueness of Christians as a group was found,  $F(2,91)=4.53$ ,  $p<0.05$ . Finally, category membership was significantly related to selective exposure,  $F(2,91)=89.08$ ,  $p<0.001$ . As further shown in Table 1, involved Christians used a more narrow construal of the category of Christians, identified stronger with this group, considered Christians a more unique group and reported more Christian friends. Whereas the results with respect to the last three factors are not very surprising in light of earlier findings, the present results also show that the more involved respondents were, the more they considered behavioural actions, such as attending church or reading the Bible as necessary for being a Christian.

In order to further investigate the relationships between the variables, regression analyses were performed. A first analysis with the five possible predictor variables revealed that identification and uniqueness did not contribute to the estimated percentage of Christians ( $\beta=0.05$  and  $\beta=0.03$ ). Further, the effect of the other three variables on the estimates was not affected by the inclusion of these two factors in a regression analysis. Therefore both variables were left out from further analyses.

In a second regression analysis the contribution of category membership, together with selective exposure was investigated. As argued earlier, it was expected that the effect of category membership on the estimates may become clearly significant, if the suppressing effect of selective exposure is accounted for. Results of this analysis indeed showed this relationship between these variables; when entered together the effect of category membership became highly significant,  $\beta=-0.51$ ,  $p=0.004$ , whereas the effect of selective exposure also was significant, but in the opposite direction,  $\beta=0.40$ ,  $p=0.019$ .

Table 1. Ratings of construal, identification, uniqueness and selective exposure

	Involved Christians	Less involved Christians	Non-believers
Construal	5.10 <sup>a</sup>	3.03 <sup>b</sup>	2.80 <sup>b</sup>
Identification	5.95 <sup>a</sup>	4.42 <sup>b</sup>	3.34 <sup>c</sup>
Uniqueness	4.57 <sup>a</sup>	3.39 <sup>b</sup>	3.60 <sup>b</sup>
Selective exposure	4.83 <sup>a</sup>	3.10 <sup>b</sup>	1.55 <sup>c</sup>

Note. Means with a differing superscript differ within one row at  $p<0.05$ .

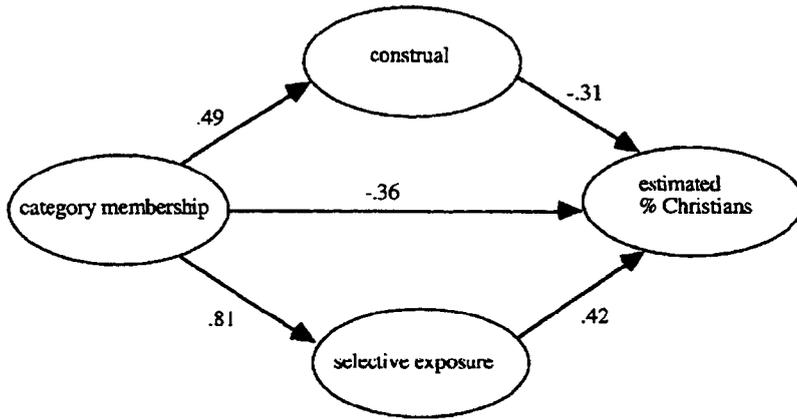


Figure 1. Standardized regression weights associated with the factors affecting the estimated percentage of Christians

In order to test the possible mediating role of construal on subjects' estimates we then applied the method, suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986), to test mediation. This test first requires that the supposed mediator (construal) affects the dependent variable (estimates) and secondly that the independent variable (category membership) affects the mediator. Finally, in order to show mediation it needs to be shown that the effect of the independent variable (category membership) decreases when this factor is added in the analysis together with the supposed mediator. In the foregoing it was shown that category membership was related to the construal factor, and to the estimates (after controlling for selective exposure) and an initial analysis showed that construal correlated significantly to the estimates ( $r = -0.31$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). It thus had to be shown that the effect of category membership ( $\beta = -0.51$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ) decreases when construal is entered in the analysis. Results of this analysis, in which category membership and selective exposure were entered together with construal indeed showed this decrease in the contribution of category membership,  $\beta = -0.36$ ,  $p = 0.04$ , whereas the contribution of selective exposure was hardly affected by adding construal as a factor,  $\beta = 0.42$ ,  $p = 0.01$ . Combining results of relevant regression analyses in a path analysis diagram gives Figure 1, showing that the effect of category membership on estimates is partly mediated by construal and selective exposure.

We then tested the extent to which each of the five predictors would affect the estimated percentages of church-attendees and baptized Christians. These analyses showed no significant effects of any of these factors. This finding is consistent with Gilovich's (1990) results, in which less ambiguous issues (providing less room for differential construal) showed weaker effects of subjects' own position. Also, these results indicate that, as suggested in the Introduction, knowledge or expectations with respect to specific behaviours did not differ between the three categories of subjects, suggesting that different construals of the general category of Christians were compared with a shared standard. Further evidence for the role of differential use of construals may be provided by looking at the relationships between estimates for the percentage of Christians and estimates for baptized Christians and church-attendees. As was suggested by the foregoing results, involved Christians presumably have in mind a more narrowly defined category, such as church attendees, when

Table 2. Standardized regression weights for estimated percentage of baptized Christians and estimated percentage of regular church attenders on the estimated percentage of Christians

	Involved Christians	Less involved Christians	Non-believers
Baptized	0.19	0.42*	0.51**
Attending church	0.63**	-0.05	0.02

estimating the percentage of Christians. If this is the case, one may predict that, for this group, perceptions of the size of the general Christian category may be associated with the estimated percentage of church-attendees instead of the percentage of baptized Christians (the first group being considerably smaller in the Netherlands than the second group). For less involved Christians and non-believers this picture may be reversed. For these respondents the estimated percentage of Christians may be associated more strongly with the estimated group of baptized Christians instead of church-attendees. The results of regression analyses in Table 2 support these predictions. For involved Christians there was a strong relation between the estimated percentage of church attendees and the estimated percentage of Christians, but no relation between the estimated percentage of baptized Christians and Christians. For both other groups this pattern was reversed. Here the relation between estimated percentage of baptized Christians and Christians was significant whereas the results did not show a relation between estimated percentage of church-attendees and estimated percentage of Christians.

## DISCUSSION

The present study has revealed a number of findings of special interest for the field of consensus estimation. First, a False Uniqueness Effect was shown in estimates for the category of Christians, although this effect only became significant when the suppressing effect of selective exposure was undone in the analysis. Second, two factors were shown to affect this FUE, category membership and differential construal. Further, although a relationship existed between category membership and feelings of uniqueness and identification, these factors did not affect consensus estimates.

Our findings support the view that selective exposure is one of the strongest predictors in consensus estimation (Bosveld *et al.*, 1994; Marks & Miller, 1987; Sherman *et al.*, 1983). As suggested by Sherman *et al.* (1983), this factor represents a logical strategy; when asked to estimate category size, people generalize from a relevant sample of others, in the present study relatives and friends. A finding of special methodological interest is that category membership related to the estimates significantly only when the selective exposure factor was included in the analyses. Thus, it seems that, especially when effects of own position are in the direction of uniqueness, one may overlook the contribution of this factor, when the strong impact of the immediate social environment is not taken into account.

The second factor identified in the present study, is the way in which respondents construe the general category of Christians. Results showed that involved Christians employed a rather strict definition and thus may have used their own behaviours in their construal of a Christian. It was argued that subjects compared this construal with shared knowledge about, for example, the number of church attendees, and it was shown that, indeed, subjects did not differ in their perceptions of this latter category or the number of baptized Christians, indicating that, at a more specific level, knowledge indeed was shared. Together it thus may be concluded that the FUE was partly the result of comparing one's individual construal with shared expectations, or knowledge, as shown earlier in Bosveld *et al.* (1995). The above reasoning is further strengthened by the fact that there was a relation between involved Christians' estimates for church-attendees and the percentage of Christians, whereas for the other two groups this relation did not exist. Instead, for these groups there was a significant relation between their estimates for the percentage of baptized Christians and the estimated percentage of Christians. These results thus indicate that Christians may think more of church-attendees, whereas less involved Christians and non-believers may think more of baptized Christians when estimating the percentage of Christians.

Beside the effect of selective exposure and construal on the estimates, category membership still was related significantly to the estimates, a finding that may raise some questions. For example, the mere availability of own position (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973) cannot account for an underestimation of category size. Motivational factors, such as the need for social support or maintaining self-esteem (Marks & Miller, 1987) also predict an overestimation of category size, whereas an underestimation of category size as a function of identification or feelings of uniqueness was not supported by our results. A possible explanation may be that involvement was related to enhanced awareness and encoding of relevant information (Spears & Manstead, 1989); the general decline in church-attendance and the less evident role of religious values in society in the Netherlands may be more salient to respondents involved in religion, and accordingly affect their estimates. However, such an interpretation is merely speculative and this result again suggests that consensus estimates may be based on a rather complex set of underlying mechanisms (Marks & Miller, 1987).

Two factors did not contribute to the estimates, identification and uniqueness. Generally speaking, these results are in line with earlier suggestions that biases in consensus estimation reflect 'a non motivational, perceptual distortion' (*cf.* Mullen, 1983, p. 37). In a similar vein, Bosveld *et al.* (1995), showed that the FCE and FUE found in that study were the result of construal processes, and were not affected by whether reference groups were ingroups or outgroups. On the basis of the present results it could be argued that there may be two different types of uniqueness, both affected by subjects' category membership. The first one represented by subjects' estimate of the number of group members, the second one represented by a feeling that one is unique in a more abstract, or affective sense. The first type uniqueness seems to refer to a quantitative perspective whereas the second type may refer to a more qualitative sense of uniqueness, and the present results again suggest that both mechanisms may operate independently; rationally speaking, perceiving Christians for example as a 'special group' indeed does not have to imply that they are a small group.

Our results suggest that a phenomenon that is considered to be rather unique in the social projection literature, the FUE, may lose some of its idiosyncrasy when viewed in light of construal processes. Research on consensus estimation mainly focuses on estimates concerning the prevalence of attitudes or preferences. Only one study is known to us in which estimates are asked for the actual categories subjects belong to (Suls *et al.*, 1990). However, the process suggested in the present study, in which subjects highly involved in a category may set strict boundaries for inclusion in that category, may also apply to other domains. For example, an environmental activist may set responsibility criteria higher than someone less engaged in environmental behaviour, and, as in our study, comparing construal with the actual category of responsible citizens, may also affect estimates of environmentally responsible citizens and result in a FUE. All in all, our data suggest that differential construal may have important consequences for the way in which people perceive social reality, not only in the field of religion, but possibly also in other, involving, domains. As noted by Allport (1954): 'Thus, the sense of belonging is a highly personal matter. Even two members of the same actual ingroup may view its composition in widely divergent terms. (. . .) The narrowed perception of individual A is the product of an arbitrary categorization. (. . .) The larger range of perception on the part of individual B creates a wholly different conception of the national ingroup. It is misleading to say that both belong to the same in-group. Psychologically, they don't' (p. 37).

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