

Researchers discover a potential flaw in our assumptions about the unknown opinions of others

October 30 2018



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

In our decisions about whether to invest in a certain company, buy tickets to a movie or vote for a political candidate, we are often influenced by what others think. But how exactly do we figure out what

others think?

In reality, most people make assumptions about general opinions from a fairly limited number of sources. To better understand this process of predicting opinions, researchers studied how participants responded to two different scenarios. In one scenario, participants viewed a scene in which four people at a restaurant all tried a new brand of bottled water. While waiting for their food, two people got up to wash their hands. The remaining two had a conversation about whether they liked the bottled water or not. The participants themselves were also told they had tried the water before and had either liked or disliked it.

In this scenario, the researchers discovered a pattern in participants' predictions about the unknown opinions: They assumed the people not present in the conversation—who went to wash their hands—would agree with the [majority opinion](#) among the speakers. If the two speakers liked the water, they assumed those not present would like it as well regardless of the participants' own opinion about the water.

In the second scenario, all four people stayed at the table and had a conversation about the bottled water, but rather than getting up from the table, the two people with unknown opinions remained and were silent in the conversation. The study respondents again were assigned a personal opinion of the new bottled water.

The researchers now found that rather than assuming that the people with unknown opinions agreed with the majority opinion, the respondents in this [scenario](#) predicted that the silent people agreed with their own opinion. This happened even when the participants' own opinion was outnumbered in the group. If both speakers in the conversation liked the water but the study respondent didn't personally like the water, the respondent assumed that the silent people did not like the [water](#) as well.

There are multiple reasons people may be silent—to avoid repeating a majority opinion, for example, or to avoid potential conflict caused by offering a differing [opinion](#).

The new research showed that people generally assume others are silent for the same reasons they would have remained silent in the same situation. The study authors called this a mirror effect. This could explain their overall finding—that people generally assume silent members of a group would agree with their own personal beliefs.

"Even though the opinions in both study scenarios were equally unknown, people drew markedly different inferences about how those with unknown opinions felt about the topic based on whether they were actively silent or simply absent from the [conversation](#)," says lead author Kimberlee Weaver Livnat, Ph.D., a marketing professor at the University of Haifa in Israel.

The findings have implications for leaders who are trying to make decisions based on group opinions. Leaders should be aware that they may interpret silence as agreement with their own viewpoint, but this may not be accurate, Weaver Livnat says. Similarly, quiet members of a group should be aware that their silence may not be accurately interpreted.

The results also have implications for how people draw conclusions about controversial topics. People are often strongly influenced by the opinions of others, and this is especially true when they are faced with complicated questions, says Weaver Livnat. These questions may include: How concerning is the risk of a pandemic? Is increased automation a wonderful step for progress or a step toward a scary future? Is cryptocurrency a savvy investment opportunity or a waste of money?

"Our answers to these types of questions depend in part on how we think others think about them," Weaver Livnat says. "But we need to examine how we decide what others think."

The study abstract appeared online in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology* in August 2018, and the final publication date is schedule for January 2019.

More information: Kimberlee Weaver et al, The Sounds of Silence: Inferences from the Absence of Word-of-Mouth, *Journal of Consumer Psychology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1002/jcpy.1067](https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1067)

Provided by Society for Consumer Psychology

Citation: Researchers discover a potential flaw in our assumptions about the unknown opinions of others (2018, October 30) retrieved 29 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-10-potential-flaw-assumptions-unknown-opinions.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.