

Communication context, explanation, and social judgment

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Abstract

The effects of the communication context on explanations and judgments were investigated in two experiments where participants explained a boy's violent behavior either to a disciplinarian or to a permissive addressee. The results of Study 1 showed that the participants' explanations varied as a function of communication context, but their judgments of responsibility were not influenced. In Study 2, the communication demand was either subtle or blatant. The participants' explanations varied as a function of communication context independently from the communication demand. However, participants' responsibility judgments were influenced only when this demand was subtle. The implications of this for explanations in everyday social settings are considered. Copyright © 2000 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Explanation giving has been seen as a communicative act occurring in social contexts (Hilton, 1990, 1995; Lalljee, 1981; Turnbull & Slugoski, 1988). Rather than starting from the viewpoint that a person has one particular explanation for an event, this perspective emphasizes that people are well aware that events are multidetermined. The person providing an explanation selects from these causes the sub-set which is appropriate for the particular occasion. Thus, the same person could provide different explanations for an event on different occasions, depending on variations in the communicative context without any difference in their underlying beliefs.

In fact, Slugoski, Lalljee, Lamb and Ginsburg (1993), drawing upon Grice's (1975) maxim of informativeness, showed that if speakers believed that the addressee knew about the person involved in an event, they provided more situational information, whereas when speakers believed that the addressee knew about the situation, they provided more personal information. The communication context provides a

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background against which explanations can be constructed (Hilton, 1990; Hilton & Slugoski, 1986; McGill, 1989; Turnbull, 1986). While these studies draw primarily on the notion of informativeness, viewing explanations as interpersonal acts leads to considering a broader range of processes that may influence the selection of explanations in different contexts. As Austin (1962) pointed out, speech is not simply a way of saying things that are true or false, but it has consequences 'on the feelings, thoughts or actions of the audience, of the speaker or of other speakers' (p. 101). For instance, explanations can be used to focus blame or praise on some other person, or to persuade the listener to act in a particular way (see Lalljee, 1981).

The experiments in this paper addressed the question whether explanation shifts triggered by the communication context affect the explainer's later judgments about the actor involved in the event explained. There are, at least, two lines of evidence suggesting that people's subsequent judgments are influenced by their explanations. Explaining an event influences the explainer's confidence in the event occurring and her judgments of the probability of that event (Ross, Lepper, Strack & Steinmetz, 1977; see Koehler, 1991 for a review). The second line of evidence comes from the work in the 'communication game' paradigm (Higgins, 1981; Higgins & McCann, 1984; Higgins & Rholes, 1978; McCann & Hancock, 1983; McCann, Higgins & Fondacaro, 1991; for reviews see Higgins, 1992; McCann & Higgins, 1992). In this paradigm, participants describe a target person to another person who, they believe, either likes or dislikes the target. The consistent findings are that participants' descriptions vary as a function of the addressee's attitude and further that their judgments of the target person are influenced in the direction of their descriptions.

EXPERIMENT 1

The first of the two studies to be reported here attempted to generalize these ideas to explanation giving and responsibility judgments. It was proposed that the selection of a particular explanation for communicative purposes will influence the communicator's subsequent responsibility judgments. In order to extend previous research on communication effects on explanation to a broader range of social contexts, we manipulated the attitude of the addressee rather than her state of knowledge. Participants were asked to explain a school incident involving a boy's violent behavior to a lenient or a disciplinarian addressee from the perspective of the boy's social worker. The function of this perspective was to induce a fairness set rather than the alternative set of 'getting along with the listener' (Higgins, 1981). Unlike in the 'communication game' situation, this manipulation should lead to explanations that contrast with the addressee's attitude.

If participants' explanations are driven by the communication context, then participants explaining the event to a disciplinarian addressee should provide more situational explanations than participants explaining the event to a lenient addressee. Further, if people's judgments are influenced by their explanations, then participants who provided situational explanations would be likely to hold the target person less responsible for the school incident than participants who provided personality based explanations.

Method

Participants

Sixty-eight undergraduate students, 28 males and 40 females, were recruited from the subject panel of the Department of Experimental Psychology, University of Oxford, and paid for their participation. The participants were assigned to the experimental conditions on a random basis.

Stimulus material

A slightly modified version of the stimulus material used by Slugoski *et al.* (1993, Experiment 1, Appendix A) was used. It consisted of personal and situational information about a target person who injured a boy in a school incident. The personality profile mainly consisted of trait descriptions which could be interpreted as implying an antisocial personality. For instance, the target person was described as 'a self-assured, even arrogant young man who appears to harbor a rebellious outlook on life'. The situational profile described the family background of the target person and the circumstances of the school incident. For instance, participants read that 'three days before the incident in question John's mother, Elaine, lapsed into a diabetic coma' and that the injured boy, 'a class bully', was seen 'arguing with John just prior to the fight'. The personality profile was designed to imply a dispositional attribution for the incident and, thus, to increase the perceived responsibility of the target. The situational profile was designed to imply a situational attribution and, thus, to decrease the perceived responsibility of the target. It also included information about the family history of the target, that was not situational strictly speaking, but provided general contextual information about John's family, e.g. 'John's father is currently unemployed and the family income is insufficient to maintain a proper home life for the children'.

Procedure

The experiment was run in small groups from two to eight participants each. Upon arrival, participants were told that this was a study investigating communication and provided with the stimulus information and a detailed written instruction for the task. The instruction informed them that the target person, John, had injured another boy and that his school is considering punishing him. Participants were also told that the background information had been provided by the previous social worker who dealt with the case and asked to imagine that they were John's new social worker.

All participants were given 10 minutes to become familiar with the stimulus information after which it was removed. Then, they were given a page for a letter to the head of the school in which the incident happened and asked to write a letter advising how John should be dealt with. This page started with a new instruction informing participants that the head teacher was either a strict disciplinarian who is likely to punish John severely or that the head was very lenient. Further, all participants were instructed that 'John should not be permitted to get away with such

behavior and should be punished, but given his circumstances, you (the participant) do not think the punishment should be too severe'. This instruction was to reinforce a sense of balance in the treatment of John, and tried to ensure that differences in communication between the two groups were clearly due to the communication context (the addressee's attitude) rather than to differences in beliefs about how John should be treated.

After writing the letter, participants were given an unrelated filler task which took about 15 minutes. Then, they were asked to rate the target on eight seven-point scales on the dimensions of responsibility, causality, blame, proneness to violence, family background, circumstances, probability of future incidents, and liking. Then, they were debriefed and paid.

Scoring of explanations

Two independent judges blind to the experimental condition scored the explanatory force of the letters on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (personality-based explanation of the incident) to 7 (situational explanation). The inter-rater agreement was sufficiently high, $r(68) = 0.78$, $p < 0.0001$, and the average of the two ratings was used in the subsequent analyses.

Results

As predicted, participants writing to a disciplinarian principal provided more situational explanations than participants writing to a lenient principal $t(66) = 3.25$, $p < 0.002$ (Table 1). Separate analyses were performed for all judgment scales. None of the effects approached significance or even marginal significance. Because the ratings on the responsibility, causality, and blame items were highly correlated (Cronbach's alpha was 0.72), a composite score for personal responsibility was calculated by averaging these items. The difference on this score between participants writing to a disciplinarian principal and participants writing to a lenient principal was not significant either, $t(66) = 1.002$, $p < 0.32$ (Table 1). The correlation between the perceived responsibility of the target and the participants' explanations of the event did not reach significance, $r(68) = -0.18$, $p > 0.14$.

Table 1. Explanations and responsibility judgments as a function of addressee attitude (Experiment 1)

	Addressee attitude	
	Disciplinarian	Permissive
Explanations	5.38	4.53
Responsibility judgments	4.37	4.16

Note. Explanations were rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (personality-based) to 7 (situational). The scale for the responsibility score ranged from 1 (not at all responsible) to 7 (completely responsible).

Discussion

Consistent with Slugoski *et al.* (1993) and with the studies reported by Higgins (1992), participants' explanations were influenced by the communication context. Participants selected different explanations to the disciplinarian and to the lenient head teacher, providing information which would act as a counterweight to the attitude of the addressee. At the same time, we did not find any effects of the communication context on the participants' judgments. Although the explanations correlated with the responsibility judgments in the expected direction, i.e. participants who provided more situational explanations assigned less responsibility to the target, this correlation did not reach significance.

The reason for these negative results could lie in the participants awareness of responding to communicative demands. Recent research in social cognition has shown that a key factor for debiasing or avoiding context influences on judgments is the participant's awareness of influence (Bargh, 1992; Strack & Hannover, 1996; Wegener & Petty, 1995, 1997; Wilson & Brekke, 1994). It is possible that participants in the current study were aware of the influence of the communicative context on their explanations and, hence discounted the explanations' implications. The instructions—which basically told both groups of participants that the target should not be let off but also not be punished too severely—could have been interpreted as a cue for debiasing. The second experiment addressed the viability of this explanation.

EXPERIMENT 2

Previous studies on context effects on judgments have shown that when the contextual influence is blatant, people correct for it in their judgments (Martin, 1986; Trope & Gaunt, 1999). However, when this influence is subtle, judgments may be assimilated to the 'contaminating' contextual factor (Wilson & Brekke, 1994). In this experiment, we manipulated the presentation of the addressee's attitude in addition to the addressee's attitude itself.

In Experiment 1, the communicative demand was presented blatantly. The addressee's attitude and the desired course of action were presented formally as part of the instructions and immediately before the explanation took place. In Experiment 2, a similar procedure was followed for half of the participants, but for the other half the communicative demand was presented more subtly. The information about the addressee's attitude was conveyed informally and the desired course of action was implied rather than stated explicitly.

Following Todorov (1998, unpublished manuscript), we predicted that participants' explanations will be influenced by the addressee's attitude independently of the presentation of this attitude. But we expected the effects on their subsequent judgments to be different. If people engage in a judgmental correction process when the contextual influence is blatant, they should discount the implications of their explanations. However, when this influence is subtle and, thus, underestimated, people may use their explanations as a basis for judgments. These processes should result in different correlational patterns for participants in the blatant demand condition and

those in the subtle demand condition. In the latter condition, the correlation between explanations and responsibility judgments should be higher than this correlation in the blatant demand condition. As a result, participants' judgments should be influenced only when the communication demand is subtle. When the latter is blatant, participants will correct their judgments for its influence.

Method

Participants

Forty students, 10 males and 30 females, from the New School for Social Research, New York, volunteered for the study and were paid for their participation. Participants were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions.

Procedure

Participants arrived and worked individually. They were told that we have a grant from the New York City School System to study how to improve communication between the Board of Education and school principals in various districts. Ostensibly, the rationale for the grant and the study was the increased concern about violence in the New York City public schools. Participants were told that the handling of incidents of school violence involves communication between representatives of different institutions, including the Board of Education and school principals. The purpose of the study was to find out ways of improving this communication.

Participants were then told that they would be given information about a real school incident, which received a lot of publicity in the newspapers, although the participant 'may not have heard about it'. Following Experiment 1, participants were told that in one of the New York City public schools, a student named John F. injured another boy and the school is considering punishing him. The participant was told that his or her task was to act as a representative of the Board of Education and to explain why the incident occurred to the principal of the school. After that, he or she was presented with the stimulus information used in Experiment 1. This information was slightly shortened so that the number of personality and contextual facts was approximately equal.

When John's description was handed to the participant, the experimenter said that the principal is either very disciplinarian and is likely to punish John severely or that the principal is very permissive and is likely to let John get away. This information was not included in the written task instruction but was communicated by the experimenter who after these words left the room where the participant was seated. Note that the desired course of action was implied but unlike in Experiment 1 was not specified explicitly. In other words, participants were initially told that the purpose of the study was to improve the communication between school principals and the Board of education in order to reduce the violence in schools. Then they were told by the experimenter that 'the boy is likely to be punished too severely' in the disciplinarian attitude condition or that 'the boy is likely to get away' in the permissive

attitude condition, presumably the undesired outcomes in the situation. These manipulations constituted the subtle demand condition.

After participants finished reading the stimulus information, they were given a page for their explanation of the school incident. For half of the participants, this page was accompanied by an additional written instruction, which function was to make the communication demand blatant. This instruction was provided after participants read the target description in order to preclude the possibility of differential encoding of the stimulus information for participants in the subtle and participants in the blatant demand condition and for consistency with Experiment 1. Thus, all procedures were the same for participants in both demand conditions except the following additional instructions given to participants in the blatant demand condition. This was the instruction in the disciplinarian attitude condition:

The Board of Education feels that people like John should not be permitted to get away with such behavior and should be punished. However, given his circumstances, the punishment should not be too severe. For example, in its explanation of the incident the Board of Education could stress the environmental factors that contributed to the fight. You should keep this principle in mind when you are providing your explanation to the disciplinarian principal.

The instruction for the lenient attitude condition read as follows:

The Board of Education feels that people like John should not be punished too severely. However, given the seriousness of the incident, John should not be permitted to get away with such behavior and should be punished. For example, in its explanation of the incident the Board of Education could stress the elements of John's character that contributed to the fight. You should keep this principle in mind when you are providing your explanation to the permissive principal.

Thus, the experiment was a 2(addresssee's attitude: disciplinarian versus permissive) \times 2(communication demand: subtle versus blatant) between-subjects design. Initially, participants were recruited for several social psychology studies. After they finished their explanations, the experimenter said that the first study was over and they were presented with several unrelated tasks, which took between 15 and 20 minutes. Then, participants were presented with the judgment task. Participants were asked to rate how responsible and aggressive John was on two eleven-point scales ranging from 0 (not at all) to 10 (extremely). They also rated how much they liked him on an eleven-point scale from 0 (not at all) to 10 (very much). At the end of the study, participants rated to what degree the information about the principal influenced their explanations of the fight on an eight-point scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 7 (very much). Then, they were debriefed and paid.

Scoring of explanations

Two independent judges blind to the experimental condition scored each explanation on a scale from 0 (personality-based explanation) to 10 (situational explanation). The

level of agreement between them was acceptable, $r(40) = 0.76$, $p < 0.0001$, and the average score of the two ratings was used in the subsequent analyses.

Results

Participants who explained the event to a disciplinarian principal provided more situational explanations ($M = 7.50$) than participants who explained the event to a permissive principal ($M = 5.25$), $F(1, 36) = 21.45$, $p < 0.0001$. As predicted, this effect was independent of the communication demand, $F_s < 1$.

Participants explaining the event to a disciplinarian principal assigned less responsibility to the target ($M = 5.30$) than participants explaining the event to a permissive principal ($M = 6.25$), $F(1, 36) = 5.35$, $p < 0.027$. However, this effect was qualified by a significant interaction of addressee attitude and communication demand (Table 2), $F(1, 36) = 4.29$, $p < 0.046$. As predicted, an analysis of simple effects showed that the difference between participants in the subtle demand condition was significant, $F(1, 36) = 9.61$, $p < 0.004$, but that it was not significant for participants in the blatant demand condition, $F < 1$.

The effects for the liking and aggressiveness judgments were not significant. As in Experiment 1, the explanations correlated weakly with the responsibility judgments, $r(40) = -0.23$, $p > 0.16$. However, separate correlational analyses for the subtle and blatant demand conditions revealed that this correlation was reliable in the subtle demand condition, $r(20) = -0.52$, $p < 0.02$, but not in the blatant demand condition, $r(20) = 0.05$. The difference between these two correlations was significant, $z = 1.83$, $p < 0.03$ (one-tailed).

At the end of the experiment, participants were asked to rate to what degree the information about the principal influenced their explanations. This question was designed as a measure of the perceived communication demand. However, the main effect of the manipulated communication demand did not reach significance for this question, $F(1, 36) = 2.61$, $p > 0.12$. The analysis revealed a marginally significant interaction of addressee attitude and communication demand, $F(1, 36) = 3.90$, $p < 0.056$. Participants in the implicit demand condition who were told that the principal was permissive underestimated the influence of the principal's attitude relative to the other participants (Table 2). This data pattern resembles the pattern of the responsibility judgments. That is, participants were most influenced when they underestimated the communicative influence.

Table 2. Explanations, responsibility judgments, and perceived demand as a function of addressee attitude and communication demand (Experiment 2)

	Disciplinarian attitude		Permissive attitude	
	Subtle demand	Blatant demand	Subtle demand	Blatant demand
Explanations	7.75	7.25	5.20	5.30
Responsibility judgments	5.10	5.50	6.90	5.60
Perceived demand	3.90	3.60	1.10	4.10

Note. Explanations were rated on an 11-point scale ranging from 0 (personality-based) to 10 (situational). The responsibility judgments were made on an 11-point scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 10 (extremely). The perceived demand was made on an 8-point scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 7 (very much).

Discussion

Replicating the findings of Experiment 1, participants who explained the event to a disciplinarian principal provided more situational explanations than participants who explained the event to a permissive principal. This effect was independent of the presentation of the information about the principal's attitude. However, participants' responsibility judgments were a function of both the addressee's attitude and the communication demand. That is, the responsibility judgments were consistent with the explanations only when the communication demand was subtle.

Presumably, participants in the subtle demand condition underestimated the influence of the addressee's attitude on their explanations and used the implications of the latter as a basis of their responsibility judgments. On the other hand, participants in the blatant demand condition were aware of the influence and discounted the explanations' implications for their responsibility judgments. The correlational findings for the two demands conditions are consistent with this interpretation.

Finally, the responsibility judgments were the only judgments reliably affected by the experimental manipulations. This result was expected on the ground that these judgments were the only judgments with direct relevance to the explanation of the event. As previous studies on priming effects on social judgments have demonstrated the activation of certain knowledge affects only stimulus evaluations that are relevant to this knowledge (Erdley & D'Agostino, 1988; Moskowitz & Roman, 1992; Stapel, Koomen & van der Plight, 1997).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The experiments reported in this paper demonstrate the role of the communication context in the generation of explanations. Participants tailored their explanations to the addressee's attitude. They provided information that was presumably less likely to be considered by the addressee and more likely to achieve their communication goal. Further, Experiment 2 showed that participants shifted their explanations independently of the communication demand. However, the latter was critical for the process of judgmental correction. Participants corrected for the influence of the addressee's attitude when the communication demand was blatant by discounting the implications of their explanations. These findings are consistent with the recent research on judgmental correction (Martin, 1986; Martin & Achee, 1992; Strack, 1992; Wegener & Petty, 1995, 1997; Wilson & Brekke, 1994).

The implications of the present studies are that when communication demands are clear, people adjust their explanations accordingly, but there are no consequences, either for their subsequent explanation giving or for their subsequent judgments. However, it remains to be seen whether the awareness of communication influence is a cure for all possible influences on speakers' judgments. It is possible that the explanations may influence the speakers' judgments in situations in which these explanations are provided publicly. For instance, being publicly associated with a particular position might make it more difficult for the explainer to take a different position on future occasions (cf. Janis & King, 1954; King & Janis, 1956). Similarly, providing a particular explanation on one occasion may influence one's explanation

on a subsequent occasion even when the demands of the situation are different (McCann *et al.*, 1991).

In sum, people offer other people different explanations that partly differ as a function of communication context. If they clearly recognize the effects of context on their explanations, then their subsequent judgments are not influenced, at least, under some conditions. If, however, they do not recognize such effects, then their subsequent judgments are affected. Consistent with other models of judgmental correction (Strack & Hannover, 1996; Wegener & Petty, 1997; Wilson & Brekke, 1994), the present findings suggest that a necessary precondition for avoiding undesirable communication influences on judgments is awareness of the communication influence.

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