



Original Article

Confidence as an expression of commitment: why misplaced expressions of confidence backfire

Colin Vulllioud^a, Fabrice Clément^a, Thom Scott-Phillips^b, Hugo Mercier^{a,*}^a Université de Neuchâtel, Centre de Sciences Cognitives, Rue Pierre à Mazel 7, Neuchâtel 2000, Switzerland^b Evolutionary Anthropology Research Group, Department of Anthropology, Durham University, Dawson Building, South Road, Durham DH1 3LE, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Initial receipt 15 January 2016

Final revision received 1 June 2016

Keywords:

Confidence

Commitment

Communication

Overconfidence

ABSTRACT

Because communication can be abused by senders, it is not inherently stable. One way of stabilizing communication is for senders to commit to their messages. If a sender is committed to a message, she is willing to incur a cost (direct or reputational) if the message is found to be unreliable. This cost provides a reason for receivers to accept messages to which senders are committed. We suggest that expressions of confidence can be used as commitment signals: messages expressed more confidently commit their senders more. On this basis, we make three predictions: that confidently expressed messages are more persuasive (H1', already well established), that senders whose messages were accepted due to the senders' confidence but were then found to be unreliable should incur costs (H2'), and that if a message is accepted for reasons other than confidence, when it is found to be unreliable the sender should incur lower reputational costs than if the message had been accepted on the basis of the sender's confidence (H3'). A review of the literature revealed broadly supportive but still ambiguous evidence for H2' and no tests of H3'. In experiments 1, 2, and 3 (testing H2') participants received the same advice from two senders, one being confident and the other unconfident. Participants were more likely to follow the advice of the confident sender, but once the advice was revealed to have been misguided, participants adjusted their trust so that they trusted the initially unconfident sender more than the confident sender. In experiments 3 and 4 (testing H3') participants chose between either two senders differing in confidence or two senders differing in competence. Participants followed the advice of the confident sender and of the competent sender. When it was revealed that the advice was misguided, the confident sender suffered from a larger drop in trust than the competent sender. These results are relevant for communicative theories of overconfidence.

© 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Communication between agents whose interests do not perfectly overlap is not inherently stable. Even if both could benefit from communication, the danger is always present that one would abuse communication for its own advantage. This observation holds at the proximal level and at the ultimate level. At the proximal level, economists and other social scientists have puzzled over the weight of 'cheap talk' (Farrell & Rabin, 1996): how can mere words influence others when lying is not inherently costly? At the ultimate level, evolutionary biologists have pointed out that communication can only be evolutionarily stable if it benefits both senders and receivers (Dawkins & Krebs, 1978; Krebs & Dawkins, 1984; Maynard Smith & Harper, 2003; Scott-Phillips, 2008). If senders do not benefit from communication, they stop sending; if receivers do not benefit from communication, they stop receiving. But what stops senders from sending signals that benefit only them, thereby threatening the stability of communication?

Several mechanisms can stabilize communication (Maynard Smith & Harper, 2003). For instance, some signals are inherently reliable because they cannot be faked—someone who says "I am not a mute"

cannot be lying, a Red Deer stag can only emit some types of roars if it is large enough (see Maynard Smith & Harper, 2003). In humans, however, very few signals are of this sort, so that we need to resort to other mechanisms to ensure the stability of communication (Sperber et al., 2010). Here we focus on one of these mechanisms: commitment. We suggest that in human communication, senders commit to various degrees to their messages. A message to which the sender commits has, everything else equal, more influence on the receiver. One way to express commitment is confidence: an assertion uttered with more confidence commits its speaker more. We lay out and evaluate—through a literature review and four experiments—consequences of this view of expressions of confidence as commitment signals. In conclusion, we relate this view to theories that seek to explain overconfidence through its communicative effects.

1. Commitment and communication

Commitment can take many forms. Some consider that commitment can be purely internal. Such 'subjective commitment' (Fessler & Quintelier, 2013) consists in maintaining a course of action not because of its instrumental value, but because of its intrinsic qualities. Fessler

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: hugo.mercier@gmail.com (H. Mercier).

and Quintelier (2013, p. 459) provide the example of a suicide bomber who follows through on his plans because this course of action reflects his moral outrage towards the targets of the bombing. In such a case, if the suicide bomber was to change his course of action, he would suffer no external costs, but psychic costs such as feeling he has betrayed a just cause. By contrast, objective commitment involves an actual cost attached to changing one's course of action (Fessler & Quintelier, 2013). Opening a retirement account which carries a heavy fee for withdrawals constitutes an objective commitment to saving for one's retirement. In this example, the costs are purely personal but many instances of objective commitment involve social costs. For instance, an individual who breaks a promise—which is a typical form of commitment—often only incurs reputational costs.

The risks an individual takes in committing—i.e. the chances of having to pay some costs if she fails to stay true to her commitment—should have a benefit, otherwise it is not clear why anybody would commit to anything. These benefits can take many forms—for instance, making sure that one is not too poor upon retirement. In the context of communication, the benefit of commitment is typically increased credibility, and the ability to influence others credibility provides. When a receiver knows that a sender would incur some costs if her communication proved unreliable, this provides him with a reason to believe her. The role of commitment in communication can be more precisely laid out with the following hypotheses:

H1. . Increased commitment should result in increased chances that a message is accepted, or increased weight granted to the message.¹

H2. . If a message is found to have been unreliable (false, harmful), and the receiver had accepted the message on the basis of the sender's commitment, then the sender should suffer reputational costs.²

For commitment to play its hypothesized communicative role, it must be the case not only that a sender of unreliable signals suffers some costs (per H2), but also that these costs be higher than they would have been if she had not been committed. It is the cost added by commitment that allows commitment to play its role. We can thus add the following hypothesis:

H3. . If a message is accepted on another basis than commitment, and if the message is found to have been unreliable, then the sender's reputation should suffer less than if the message had mostly been accepted on the basis of commitment. This would happen for instance when a message is accepted because the receiver had deemed the sender competent.

2. Expressions of confidence as commitment signals

At least since Schelling's foundational work (Schelling, 1960), the communicative benefits of commitment have received much attention (in an evolutionary perspective, see, e.g. Fessler & Quintelier, 2013; Nesse, 2001). This attention has mostly focused on explicit commitments, such as promises (e.g. Schelling, 2001). However, other speech acts also commit their sender. In particular, assertions commit their sender to the truth of the proposition expressed (e.g. Searle, 1969). This suggests that a sender whose assertions are found to be false would suffer reputational costs. In practice, the distinction between speech acts is often blurred (e.g. Astington, 1988), and what matters is

¹ Some caveats, which are not explored here, should be added to this hypothesis. The increased trust that results from increased commitment should be seen as multiplying the a priori trust in the sender rather than adding to it, so that completely mistrusted senders cannot rely on commitment to get their messages across. Moreover, expressed degrees of confidence that are implausibly high (e.g. "I am 100% sure my lottery number will come out") should also be dismissed.

² Reputational losses can affect either the perceived benevolence or the perceived competence of the sender (see Sperber et al., 2010). In theory the losses due to failed commitments should mostly bear on the sender's perceived benevolence, but given that this prediction was not tested here, we do not elaborate further on this point.

not simply whether one's speech act is, say, a promise or an assertion, but the degree of commitment that the sender expresses.

Human languages possess a variety of devices that enable senders to modulate their degree of commitment (Moeschler, 2013; Morency, Oswald, & de Saussure, 2008). For instance, a sender is more committed to the propositional content of her utterances than to their implicatures (Moeschler, 2013). Expressions of confidence also likely affect the degree to which the sender is understood by receivers to be committed to her statements. Expressions of confidence are ubiquitous in human communication, be they verbal ("I'm sure," "I guess," etc.) or non-verbal (gestures, tones, facial expressions). Indeed, the mechanisms which allow senders to gauge their level of confidence might have evolved for the purpose of communication (Shea et al., 2014). If expressions of confidence play the role of commitment signals, then the hypotheses formulated above about commitment in general should apply to expressions of confidence:

H1'. . Increased confidence should result in increased chances that a message is accepted, or increased weight granted to the message (the same caveats as above apply).

H2'. . If a message is found to have been unreliable (false, harmful), and the receiver had accepted the message on the basis of the sender's confidence, then the sender should suffer reputational costs.

H3'. . If a message is accepted on another basis than sender confidence, and if the message is found to have been unreliable, then the sender's reputation should suffer less than if the message had mostly been accepted on the basis of confidence. This would happen for instance when a message is accepted because the receiver had deemed the sender competent.

H1' and H2' are similar to the hypotheses laid out about calibration in Tenney et al. (2008, p. 1369). In support of H1', many experiments have revealed that confidence tends to increase the influence messages have on receivers (see, e.g., Price & Stone, 2004; Tenney, Small, Kondrad, Jaswal, & Spellman, 2011; Yaniv, 1997; and, for children, Brosseau-Liard, Cassels, & Birch, 2014). The goal of this article is to review the evidence relevant to H2', to further test H2', and to offer the first—to the best of our knowledge—tests of H3'.

3. Do receivers punish senders who were confident but wrong?

Experiments relevant to evaluating H2' have yielded contradictory results. A first series of experiments unambiguously supports H2'. Tenney and her colleagues (Tenney, MacCoun, Spellman, & Hastie, 2007; Tenney et al., 2008, 2011) confronted participants with the testimony of two senders whose confidence calibration was manipulated. For instance, in experiment 1 of Tenney et al. (2008), the participants had to evaluate the testimony of two witnesses on the basis of the accuracy of two collateral statements (i.e. statements unrelated to the case used to evaluate the reliability of a witness' testimony). One witness was confident for both statements, while the other was confident for one statement and unconfident for the other. At first, the participants did not know whether the statements were accurate; they were then more likely to trust the confident witness. It was then revealed that each witness had been mistaken about one statement. As a result, the confident witness was poorly calibrated, having held confidently an inaccurate statement. In one condition, the less confident witness was well calibrated since she had been wrong on the uncertain statement. In this condition, after the accuracy feedback the participants found the less confident but better calibrated witness to be more credible than the more confident but less well calibrated witness, and they were more likely to believe her testimony. This experiment offers strong support for H2'. The participants initially accepted a piece of testimony because its sender was confident. When the confidence of the sender was revealed to have been unwarranted, the participants chose to

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5044844>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5044844>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)