



Antecedents of bullshitting

John V. Petrocelli^{*,1}

Wake Forest University, United States



ARTICLE INFO

Editor: Robbie Sutton

Keywords:

Accountability

Bullshit

Bullshitting

Lying

ABSTRACT

Although it appears to be a common social behavior, very little is known about the nature of bullshitting (i.e., communicating with little to no regard for evidence, established knowledge, or truth; Frankfurt, 1986) and the social conditions under which it is most likely to occur. The current investigation examines specific antecedents of bullshitting, particularly examining topic knowledge, evidence for or against an *obligation to provide an opinion hypothesis*, and an *ease of passing bullshit hypothesis*. Experiment 1 suggests that bullshitting is augmented only when both the social expectations to have an opinion, and the cues to show concern for evidence, are weak. Experiment 2 demonstrates that bullshitting can also be attenuated under conditions of social accountability. Results are discussed in light of social perception, attitude change, and new directions aimed at reducing the unwanted effects of bullshitting.

1. Introduction

Bullshitting (i.e., communicating with little to no concern for evidence or truth; Frankfurt, 1986) appears to be an inevitable social behavior and a salient feature of our culture. Initial empirical evidence suggests that bullshit-based content can sometimes be misperceived as something profound (Pennycook, Cheyne, Barr, Koehler, & Fugelsang, 2015; Pfattheicher & Schindler, 2016; Sterling, Jost, & Pennycook, 2016). Additional empirical evidence suggests that bullshitting can have important social consequences and utilities; particularly, bullshit is found to be evaluated less negatively than lying and can be used as a successful persuasion tactic (Petrocelli, 2018). However, very little empirical knowledge exists about the behavior of bullshitting and the antecedents of bullshitting remain unidentified.

Bullshitting appears to be a common social activity (Spicer, 2013) and there is a constant struggle against it (Cohen, 2002; Crockett, Dhar, & Mayyasi, 2014; Law, 2011; Penny, 2005). An understanding of the conditions under which bullshitting occurs is critical to the discovery of methods of attenuating the behavior and/or defending against it. The current investigation stands as the first empirical analysis designed to identify the social antecedents of bullshitting behavior.

1.1. A definition of bullshitting

Consistent with Frankfurt's (1986) conceptualization, *bullshitting* is defined here as communications that result from little to no concern for truth, evidence and/or established semantic, logical, systemic, or empirical knowledge.² When people intentionally or unintentionally express ideas or information in ways that are disconnected from a concern for evidence or established knowledge, they are in essence bullshitting. Importantly, Frankfurt (1986) suggested that people often feel an implicit responsibility or obligation to hold and/or express an informed opinion about almost everything. In fact, it is well established that people are perfectly willing to offer judgments and opinions about that which they could not possibly know anything about (e.g., Herr, Sherman, & Fazio, 1983). However, people cannot possibly have an informed opinion about everything and holding all communication to the standard of verifiable evidence is a seemingly unreasonable standard. Construing society as one that demands of everyone an informed opinion about everything may inadvertently promote bullshitting. In any case, the social norms of feeling obligated to have an opinion about everything, and a willingness to express opinions without any concern for evidence in support of those views, position bullshitting as a common social activity. Given that bullshitting is almost unavoidable, and therefore a common social activity (Allen, Allen, & McGoun, 2012;

* Department of Psychology, Wake Forest University, P.O. Box 7778, Winston-Salem, NC 27109, United States.

E-mail address: petrocjv@wfu.edu.

¹ The author extends sincere gratitude to Catherine E. Seta and John J. Seta for their insights and comments on earlier stages of this work.

² Bullshitting may also refer to a lack of concern for "truth". However, truth is pluralistic (i.e., a system of thought that recognizes more than one ultimate principle and/or a diversity of ideas; Horwich, 2010; Künne, 2003; Lynch, 2009; Pedersen & Wright, 2013). In fact, philosophers (Bernal, 2006; Preti, 2006; Reisch, 2006) speculate that bullshitters often believe their own bullshit; that is, the bullshitter believes what he/she says is true (Bernal, 2006; Preti, 2006; Reisch, 2006). The problem with bullshitting then lies in the fact that bullshit represents a distorted view of the truth, lacking in concern or consideration for evidence or established knowledge (also see Allen et al., 2012; Morgan, 2010; Spicer, 2013).

Frankfurt, 1986; Morgan, 2010; Spicer, 2013), it is surprising that little empirical knowledge about the behavior exists.

In his theory of bullshit, Frankfurt (1986) outlined several propositions of the behavior of bullshitting, many of which have been generally accepted by analytical philosophers (Aberdein, 2006; Hardcastle, 2006; Kimbrough, 2006; Law, 2011; Maes & Schaubroeck, 2006); although some have proposed alternative types of bullshitting (see: Cohen, 2002; Reisch, 2006) that do not lend as easily to empirical investigation. As defined here, bullshitting is not determined by the content of what people communicate. That is, bullshitting has more to do with *how* people communicate (i.e., the underlying concern for evidence/established knowledge and the manner in which they promote and defend claims) and less to do with *what* is communicated (Law, 2011).³ Communicating any claim, such as “Pluto is a planet in our solar system.”, can be done without any concern for evidence or knowledge or it can be done with such concern. The former is considered bullshit, but the latter is not. In essence, the bullshitter is a relatively careless thinker/communicator and plays fast and loose with ideas and/or information as he bypasses consideration of, or concern for, evidence and established knowledge.

Perhaps the most extreme example of bullshit is captured by Pennycook et al.'s (2015) Bullshit Receptivity (BSR) scale. Using a computerized algorithm and a list of words (some of them profound-sounding), the BSR scale is composed of randomly constructed statements containing appropriate syntactic structure. One is example is “Imagination is inside exponential space time events.” (Pennycook et al., 2015, p. 552). By definition, such a statement is entirely bullshit because it is an assortment of words with absolutely no concern for, or basis in, truth. As Pennycook et al. noted, bullshit is distinct from mere nonsense as it implies, but does not contain, adequate meaning or truth.

Bullshitting is also not the same as lying.^{4,5} As Frankfurt (1986) argued, the liar knows the truth and communicates with respect to the goal of detracting others from the truth. On the other hand, the bullshitter has no regard for evidence in support of what he/she believes to be true. In fact, what the bullshitter communicates may be true, but the bullshitter wouldn't know whether or not he/she is communicating the truth. The bullshitter doesn't care what the truth actually is, and he/she

³ The notion of *how* one communicates with respect or lack thereof for evidence and/or truth is consistent with Frankfurt's (1986) definition of bullshit, whereas the notion of *what* is communicated is consistent with Cohen's (2002) unique definition. Cohen defined bullshit as obscure output or semantic content that is cannot be clarified or unobscured. That is, any particular claim could be deemed bullshit, in and of itself. However, that which is considered nonsense or truth is pluralistic. According to the definition employed in the current research, bullshitting is an activity with an indifference to an important element of sound judgment and reasoning (e.g., evidence, established knowledge, truth), not necessarily de facto claims about whether particular communicative content is and is not bullshit. Treating the behavior of bullshitting as a way of communicating escapes the epistemological quandaries that Cohen's definition of bullshit is subject to. In fact, Dalton (2016) raised this very concern, arguing that any statement could, in fact, be subjectively profound and contain elements of insight and wisdom.

⁴ Bullshitting is also distinct from propaganda. Propaganda is form of communication, often used by political campaigners, sales agents, advertisers, and others aimed toward influencing the attitude of a population toward some cause or position. Used to further an agenda, propaganda is often characterized by playing to emotions by appealing to fears, popular desires, prejudices, and irrational hopes, rather than by using rational argument, creating a rather distorted vision of the world (Jowett, 1987; Petty, Wells, & Brock, 1976; Pratkanis & Aronson, 2001; Sussman, 2011). Similar to the liar, the propagator is aware of the truth and frames or distorts the truth to further his/her agenda by influencing the attitudes of others. The bullshitter, on the other hand, is not concerned with truth and is not using it as a tool of mass persuasion. In fact, as Frankfurt (1986) surmised, sometimes one is compelled to bullshit in order to test out the reactions of those around them or to feel what it is like to say such bullshit. Although propaganda could conceivably involve bullshit, not all bullshit is propaganda.

⁵ The disregard for evidence, characteristic of the bullshitter, should not be confused with sociopathic behavior. The sociopath behaves without regard for society in general or its rules and laws, the rights of others. They also fail to feel remorse or guilt and have a tendency to display violent behavior (Mealey, 1995; Pemment, 2013). It is quite likely that sociopathic behavior will involve some degree of bullshitting, bullshitting in and of itself is not sociopathic.

isn't even trying to know or communicate the truth. One important commonality between bullshitting and lying is that both the bullshitter and liar alike appear genuine or as if they are concerned with the truth. Thus, in practice, for the receiver it is difficult to determine if one is bullshitting, lying, or telling the truth as he/she sees it.

Statements of one's own beliefs or opinions are not considered bullshit, as one's beliefs and opinions are self-evident; although one's belief or opinion itself might be based on bullshit. Offering an explanation, while simultaneously having little to no concern for verifiable evidence, is by definition bullshitting. In this case, one is also not lying; again, his/her explanation could be true. If he/she is explaining his/her belief based on what he/she counts as verifiable evidence, then he/she is not bullshitting. People frequently trust in explanation (and clear bullshit), and that may not be a bad thing where verifiable evidence is hard to come by. On the other hand, when making scientific claims, explanation does not count as evidence – evidence tends to be held to a higher standard to avoid bullshit claims and conclusions.

1.2. Social antecedents of bullshitting

1.2.1. Obligation to provide an opinion

The emergence of bullshitting behavior is likely to have something to do with the social conditions that support it, either by social norms and expectations or by those that make it easy to engage in. Frankfurt (1986) surmised: “Bullshit is unavoidable whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about. Thus the production of bullshit is stimulated whenever a person's obligations or opportunities to speak about some topic are more extensive than his knowledge of the facts that are relevant to that topic.” (p. 99). Thus, Frankfurt suggests that bullshitting is predicated on the assumption that people feel an obligation to have/provide an informed opinion about everything; people engage in bullshitting in order to express their “informed” opinions or “try out” what it feels like to express such opinions. Assuming that social obligations exist, an *obligation to provide an opinion hypothesis* is proposed here, such that people are especially likely to engage in bullshitting when it is clear that the social expectations to have an opinion are relatively great.

1.2.2. Knowledge

Frankfurt's (1986) assertions regarding obligations to provide an opinion also implicate knowledge. That is, bullshitting behavior should be increasingly attenuated as knowledge increases.

However, one perspective suggests that people may be especially likely to engage in bullshitting when they feel relatively knowledgeable about the topic of discussion. In fact, Paulhus, Harms, Bruce, and Lysy (2003) found that people are perfectly willing to report possessing knowledge, even about things that do not actually exist, as is the case in over-claiming. In such cases, people should have more to contribute than when they feel relatively unknowledgeable.⁶ On the other hand, Brem and Rips (2000) demonstrated that when people possess adequate knowledge about a topic they usually provide more evidence over that of explanation; greater awareness of topic relevant information appears to yield greater concern for multiple perspectives and evidence. Thus, when people feel unfamiliar with a topic they may be expected to increase their bullshitting activity; people who are actually familiar with a topic do not need to bullshit – they, as Brem and Rips demonstrated, are more aware of evidence and use it.

⁶ As a case in point, “Jaywalking” segments of *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* and *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* often ask people, “on the street”, to report their thoughts about the “obvious”; things that the large majority (i.e., the “average” citizen) would be clearly expected to know (e.g., When was the Declaration of Independence adopted? What keeps the earth orbiting around the sun?). Interestingly, people appear to be perfectly willing to bullshit about things they clearly do not know anything about, as long it is sounds like something they should know about.

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