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Creating shared reality about ambiguous sexual harassment: The role of stimulus ambiguity in audience-tuning effects on memory

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ABSTRACT

By tuning messages about ambiguous information to their audience's attitude, communicators can reduce uncertainty and form audience-congruent memories. This effect has been conceptualized as the creation of shared reality with the audience. We applied this approach to representations of ambiguous antecedents of sexual harassment and examined whether the effect depends on the event's perceived ambiguity. Participants read a testimony about a supervisor's ambiguous behaviors toward a female employee and described the behaviors to an audience who had previously evaluated him positively or negatively. We manipulated perceived ambiguity of the testimony by including or omitting information about eventual, clear-cut harassment (known vs. unknown outcome). As predicted, participants aligned their messages and memory with their audience's evaluation only in the unknown-outcome condition, where epistemic uncertainty was higher. The findings highlight the role of epistemic needs in the communicative creation of a shared reality about a ubiquitous social situation with potentially harmful outcomes.

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1. Introduction

Social events, particularly people's behaviors, often allow different interpretations and are hence ambiguous. There are various ways in which perceivers can reduce such ambiguity and the concomitant uncertainty. A channel that has received little, but increasing attention is interpersonal communication (e.g., Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Echterhoff, Higgins, & Levine, 2009; Higgins, 1992). One way in which interpersonal communication allows communicators to reduce uncertainty is *audience tuning* (Higgins, 1992). Audience tuning occurs when communicators adapt their message to the audience's perspective or attitude regarding an event (e.g., Clark & Murphy, 1982; Higgins, 1992). Audience tuning not only affects message formulation, but can also have consequences for communicators' subsequent cognition, including memory for the originally encoded events or behaviors (McCann & Higgins, 1992; for related accounts, see Chiu, Krauss, & Lau, 1998; Marsh, 2007).

For example, after communicators have tuned a message about a target person's ambiguous behaviors to an audience's (positive or negative) attitude toward the target, they often end up with memories of the target that are consistent with their audience-tuned message (Echterhoff, Higgins, & Groll, 2005; Higgins & Rholes, 1978). To illustrate, an audience-tuning effect on memory occurs when a team member describes a newcomer's ambiguous behavior more positively to a team colleague who likes the newcomer, and later remembers the newcomer's initial behaviors more positively, consistent with the audience-tuned message.

This audience-tuning effect on memory has been investigated within the saying-is-believing paradigm, where participants are given ambivalent behavioral information about a target person (Higgins & Rholes, 1978). They are asked to describe the target person to an audience who has already formed an impression about the target. Those who communicate with an audience who likes (vs. dislikes) the target person describe the target more positively. As a result, the valence of communicators' memory of the original target material, assessed with a surprise free-recall task, matches the valence of their audience-tuned messages (for a review, see

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Echterhoff, Higgins, et al., 2009). Hence, both the communicators' message and their memory are aligned with the audience's attitude. The effect can be regarded as communication-driven because it depends on the production of an audience-congruent message: the effect is not found when communicators, who know the audience's attitude, do not actually produce a message (Higgins & Rholes, 1978; Higgins, Echterhoff, Crespillo, & Kopietz, 2007). Also, the effect of the audience's attitude on recall valence is often statistically mediated by message valence (McCann & Higgins, 1992). Thus, the effect is a case of conversational influence on communicators' own memory (Hirst & Echterhoff, 2012).

This audience-tuning effect on communicators' memory has been conceptualized as the creation of shared reality (Echterhoff, Higgins, et al., 2009; Hardin & Higgins, 1996). Shared reality is defined as the product of the motivated process of experiencing a commonality of inner states about the world (Echterhoff, Higgins, et al., 2009). According to shared-reality theory, the audience-tuning effect occurs to the extent that communicators are motivated to create a shared reality with their audience and succeed at creating that shared reality. The motivation for creating this commonality can be relational (Echterhoff, Lang, Krämer, & Higgins, 2009; Pierucci, Klein, & Carnaghi, 2013) and, more critical to our current analysis, epistemic. Epistemic motivation reflects the need to achieve a valid and reliable understanding of the world (Hardin & Higgins, 1996), to establish what is real (Higgins, 2012) and to reduce uncertainty (e.g., Kruglanski, 2004). The greater epistemic needs from ambiguous experiences, the more people seek a shared reality with others (Echterhoff, Higgins, et al., 2009; Festinger, 1950).

Saying-is-believing studies support the notion that the communicator's shared-reality motivation is critical. For instance, when audience tuning of the message is motivated by alternative, non-shared reality motives (e.g., obtaining a reward, or complying with blatant demands), communicators' memory is not biased toward the audience's attitude (Echterhoff, Higgins, Kopietz, & Groll, 2008). Thus, audience tuning of the message will lead to audience-congruent memory only when audience tuning is sufficiently motivated by shared-reality concerns.[2] In contrast, other research on communication effects on memory has centered on the cognitive processes during message production, such as selective rehearsal (Pasupathi, Stallworth, & Murdoch, 1998) or the formation, or activation, of a schema that continues to guide subsequent recall (Marsh, 2007).

According to a shared-reality account, the epistemic needs driving shared-reality creation are elicited by the ambiguity of the stimulus material. However, this central assumption has never been tested in experimental research. The main purpose of the present research was to fill this gap. Specifically, shared-reality creation through audience tuning should be more likely under high (vs. low) epistemic uncertainty.

So far, the epistemic-needs account has been examined in only one study (Kopietz, Hellmann, Higgins, & Echterhoff, 2010). In Experiment 2 by Kopietz et al. (2010), negative (vs. positive) ability feedback was used to manipulate high (vs. low) epistemic uncertainty in participants who were previously asked to form social judgments about characters depicted in ambiguous social interactions. It was found that only high-epistemic-uncertainty participants tuned their messages and memory to the audience's attitude. However, in this study, like in all extant saying-is-believing studies, the target description was carefully designed to be ambiguous, and the same version was used in all conditions. In our Experiment we manipulated perceived stimulus ambiguity for the first time to test its role in shared-reality creation through audience tuning.

2. Application to ambiguous sexual harassment

In our research, we applied this rationale to representations of sexual harassment at the workplace. We chose this domain for the following reasons: First of all, sexual harassment is a widespread social issue (European Agency for Safety and Health at work, 2010). A vexing and notorious feature of sexual harassment is the ambiguity of many of the surrounding behaviors (Pryor & Day, 1988). For instance, the same act of stroking can be interpreted as a flirt or as an act of harassment (Gordon, Cohen, Grauer, & Rogelberg, 2005). Also, sexual harassment involves negative outcomes for at least one of the involved parties, and people are particularly motivated to interpret and understand events with a negative or disconcerting outcome (Baumeister, 1991). The ambiguity and potentially harmful consequences of behaviors involved in sexual harassment are likely to elicit epistemic uncertainty, which can be reduced by creating a shared reality through communication. Because the workplace is an arena of constant talk and gossip it should be conducive to such communicative processes.

We tested whether shared reality through audience tuning depends on the perceived ambiguity of the harassment scenario. At the workplace, sexual harassment often unfolds over time, starting with subtle gestures or remarks and proceeding to more blatant and overt forms of harassment (Gordon et al., 2005). During this process, the ambiguity of surrounding behaviors is higher at the beginning of a potential harassment episode and decreases sharply when the potential harasser performs blatant acts of harassment, such as offering career benefits for sexual favors. Given these characteristics, the identification of sexual harassment at the workplace is particularly outcome-sensitive. This outcome sensitivity allowed us to employ a manipulation of ambiguity that involved only a minimal change of the target material, specifically the addition of brief outcome information revealing unambiguous harassment.

3. The present research

To apply the saying-is-believing paradigm to the context of sexual harassment we made the following adaptations. We created a scenario describing interactions between a male supervisor and a female employee. This input material included the same number of harassment-consistent and harassment-inconsistent behaviors and did not end in clear-cut sexual harassment. Participants wrote their message about the target person (i.e., the supervisor) to a female audience, a colleague of the employee, who presumably either liked or disliked the target person. The liking information was employed to manipulate the audience's attitude. The audience's ostensible task was to identify the target person from a set of other employees. The ambiguity of the input material should provoke uncertainty and hence epistemic needs that motivate participants to seek a shared reality with their audience (Echterhoff, Higgins, et al., 2009).

As in previous saying-is-believing studies, the main dependent measures were the valence (evaluative tone) of message and the valence of recall. The valence measures allow researchers to

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[2] We note that shared-reality motivation does not imply, or require, an explicit or conscious representation of adaptat ion to the audience. Extant theorizing has distinguished shared-reality motivation from a conscious intention to tune one's message to the audience (Echterhoff, Higgins, et al., 2009). This distinction has received empirical support. For instance, when the intention to adapt one's message to the audience is experimentally induced, the audience-tuning effect on communicators' subsequent cognition is reduced or eliminated (Echterhoff et al., 2008; Kopietz et al., 2010; Todorov, 2002), presumably because the goal of demonstrating overt adaptation to the audience becomes more important than shared-reality goals. Taken together, the empirical evidence suggests that the audience-tuning effect is supported by the communicators' private motivation to achieve a shared reality with the audience, but impeded by efforts of demonstrating public compliance.

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