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Conversational Relevance in the Presentation of the Self

Does the presentation of the self depend on participants' inferences about the researcher's interests? Participants were asked to complete "I am..." statements while the researcher's affiliation was manipulated. As expected, participants were more likely to report social aspects of the self (e.g., ethnic identity, party affiliation) when the study was allegedly conducted by the Institute of Political Research than when it was conducted by the Institute of Psychological Research. Thus, participants focused on aspects of the self that they could consider most relevant to the researcher's interest. Theoretical and methodological implications are discussed.

Keywords:

In much of the research on the self, a common strategy has been to assess individuals' self-concept by asking them to complete a version of "I am..." statements, also known as the Twenty Statement Test first developed by Kuhn & McPartland (1954). This open-ended research strategy has been popular since it is believed to allow participants to freely describe themselves with little constraints introduced by the research context. The obtained responses are typically assumed to reflect salient aspects of the self, such as features that distinguish the self from others (e.g., McGuire & McGuire, 1988), cultural differences (Cousins, 1989; Triandis, Trafimow, & Goto, 1991), as well as gender differences (Watkins et al, 1998).

Given the multitude of potentially appropriate self-descriptions, however, participants are likely to face a selection problem: Which of the many features of the self that may come to mind are they to report? We propose that participants resolve this issue by taking the researcher's likely interests into consideration, much as they would be expected to do in everyday conversations.

In general, speakers are supposed to provide information that is relevant to the goal of the ongoing conversation, requiring complex inferences

about the participants' respective interest (e.g., Grice, 1975; Sperber & Wilson, 1986). In daily conversations, these inferences are typically based on previous utterances. In research situations, however, participants may draw on apparently formal features of the research instrument (such as the content of preceding questions or the response alternatives presented by the researcher) to infer what the researcher is interested in (see Schwarz, 1994, 1996, 1999 for reviews).

The researcher's academic affiliation may also provide unintended cues to the participants as to the researcher's interests. For example, Norenzayan and Schwarz (1999) asked students on a university campus to explain the causes of a highly publicized mass murder they read about. When the letterhead of the questionnaire was titled "Institute for Personality Research," participants' causal explanations focused on the mass murderer's personality traits. When the identical questionnaire was titled "Institute for Social Research," participants' explanations focused on social factors behind the mass murder. Thus, participants provided explanations that they thought were relevant to the interests of the researcher, which could be ascertained from the researcher's academic affiliation.

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The present study extends this line of research by exploring the impact of the researcher's institutional affiliation on the presentation of the self. Specifically, we asked participants to complete "I am..." statements as part of a study allegedly conducted by the Institute of Political Research or by the Institute of Psychological Research. We assumed that students expect political scientists to be interested in social aspects of the self (such as party affiliation or ethnic identity), but expect psychologists to be interested in dispositional aspects of the self (personality traits). Hence, we predicted that participants would provide more social and fewer dispositional responses when the researcher is identified as a political scientist, but more dispositional and fewer social responses when the researcher is identified as a psychologist. Given that in the past literature women's self-concepts have been found to be in some respects more relational than men's (e.g., see Cross & Madson, 1997, and associated commentaries), gender was also included in the analyses to examine whether this effect emerges in men and women in the same way.

Method

Procedure

62 students (32 men, 30 women) completed a three page questionnaire. The otherwise blank cover sheet identified the Institute of Political Research or the Institute of Psychological Research as the researcher's affiliation. The second page presented the Twenty Statement Test (Kuhn & McPartland, 1954), a series of 20 open-ended "I am..." statements. The final page assessed demographic information.

Content Analysis

The self-descriptions were categorized by two independent raters as pertaining to one of the following categories:

1. Social responses: self-descriptions reflecting common fate between the respondent and other people, e.g., family, ethnicity, religion, gender, hometown, occupational group.
2. Dispositional responses: self-descriptions referring to stable internal personal characteristics, such as personality traits, stable attitudes.
3. Other responses: responses which were neither social nor dispositional.

Results

The inter-coder reliability was very high.  $r(61) = .96$  and  $.97$  for the social and dispositional categories, respectively. The two coders' data were averaged to produce a single measure of social, dispositional, and other self-descriptions. Because the TST requires participants to write a total of twenty self-descriptions, it is likely that the effect of any contextual cue may dissipate after the first few responses. Furthermore, past research has shown that near the end of the test, participants often run out of self-descriptions and give nonsense responses, which introduce further measurement error. To address these problems, we analyzed responses separately for the first five and the next fifteen responses, following previous research (see, for example, Trafimow, et al, 1991).

We conducted an ANOVA with conversational cue and gender as the between-subjects factors, and block (first five vs. next fifteen responses) and response type (social vs. dispositional) as the within-subjects factors. A main effect of response type emerged, such that participants overall gave more dispositional than social self-descriptions,  $F(1, 58) = 5.23, p < .05$ . A block by response type interaction emerged,  $F(1, 58) = 7.29, p < .001$ . However this interaction was qualified by a three-way interaction between block, response type, and conversational cue,  $F(1, 58) = 6.71, p < .02$ . As expected, participants in the social cue condition

Table 1  
Mean percentage of self-descriptions as a function of conversational cue, gender, and block

Self-descriptions	Psychological		Political	
	Men n=17	Women n=14	Men n=15	Women n=16
<b>First five block</b>				
Dispositional	46.8	41.4	37.3	47.5
Social	4.7	25.7	20.0	30.0
Other	48.5	32.9	42.7	22.5
<b>Last fifteen block</b>				
Dispositional	44.4	36.2	41.9	62.8
Social	5.1	16.7	9.7	8.8
Other	50.5	47.1	48.4	28.4

Note: Psychological = "Institute of Psychological Research"; Political = "Institute of Political Research".

gave more social self-descriptions than those in the psychological cue condition for the first five responses, but not for the last fifteen responses. Dispositional self-descriptions were largely unaffected by the conversational cue or by the response block. Table 1 presents the means for each condition.

Focusing on the first five self-descriptions, it can be seen in Figure 1 that participants reported more social aspects of the self when the study was conducted by the Institute of Political Research than when it was conducted by the Institute of Psychological Research. Specifically, 25% of the responses were categorized as "social" in the former condition, but only 15% in the latter,  $F(1, 58) = 2.55, p = .11$ . The pattern of the means (see Figure 1) shows that the conversational cue effect for the first five social responses was unexpectedly less pronounced for women than for men, although the 4-way interaction was not statistically significant,  $F < 1$ . In addition, although women, similar to men, reported more dispositional than social self-descriptions, women overall reported more social responses than men,  $F(1, 58) = 4.70, p < .05$ . This latter finding is in line with previous research showing that women's self-concept is in some respects more relational than that of men (Cross & Madson, 1997).

The conversational hypothesis can be further tested by considering the proportion of participants who provided more social than dispositional responses: this was the case for 35% (11 out of 31) of the participants in the political condition, but only 16% (5 out of 31) of the participants in the psychological condition,  $\chi^2(N=62) = 3.97, p = .04$ . Participants in the two conversational prime conditions did not differ in age, gender, political affiliation, or interest in politics.

Discussion

Self-descriptions, as measured in psychological experiments, are affected by participants' inferences about the researcher's interests. This effect adds to the growing literature indicating that the experimental situation is not immune to the communicative context in which it occurs. Conversational assumptions made by speakers (the participants) systematically affect participants' responses provided to the listeners (the researchers), and bias psychological measurements in predictable ways (Schwarz, 1999).

It is important to clarify what this conversational effect is not. Our view is that this effect does not represent an attempt by participants to please the researcher by confirming what they believe to be the researcher's hypothesis (e.g., Orne, 1961). Rather, it is an attempt to tell her what she wants to know (Schwarz, 1996). As Kihlstrom (1995, September) observes, "Subjects aren't just motivated to guess and confirm the experimenter's hypothesis. As listeners, that is, as people, they are primarily motivated to make sense of any communicative situation in which they find themselves" (p. 11). This effect, then, can be traced to participants wanting to be informative by providing the researcher with relevant information.

The effect of the conversational cue on self descriptions was limited by a gender difference – it did not emerge among the women in the sample. Researchers have found that women's self-concepts, in individualistic cultures at least, are on average more relational than men's self-concepts (e.g., Watkins et al, 1998). Consistent with this, we found in this study that women generated a larger proportion of social (inter-

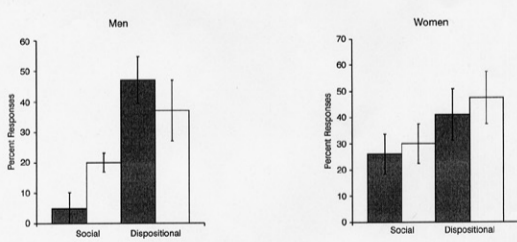


Figure 1. First five self descriptions (social and dispositional) as a function of conversational cue (psychological versus political) for men (top panel) and women (bottom panel)

dependent) self-descriptions than men, although consistent with cultural expectations, women, like men, generated more dispositional than social self-descriptions. Therefore we expected that if gender differences were to emerge, women would be more responsive to conversational context than men. However this was not the case. In fact, men were responsive to the conversational context but not women in this study. Since no gender difference was obtained in a similar previous study that assessed the effect of researcher affiliation on causal attributions (Norenzayan & Schwarz, 1999), this gender difference requires replication in further research and may reflect differences in the malleability of the self-concept rather than differences in responsiveness to conversational context.

The observation that self-descriptions are affected by participants' inferences about the researcher's interest has theoretical as well as methodological implications for the study of the self. Theoretically, it suggests that in addition to a number of contextual factors which make the self into a dynamic, malleable psychological entity (Markus & Kunda, 1986), the self is also influenced by the conversational context in which communication between the speaker and the listener occurs.

Second, these results are important methodologically, indicating that research participants consider information about the formal features of the research situation, such as the researcher's professional background, in tailoring their self-descriptions, in a way that renders them informative to the researcher. As a result, psychological studies that investigate the extent to which the self concept varies across cultures, genders, and situations would benefit from taking into account the conversational context of the research situation to minimize reporting biases that are driven by unintended cues extracted from the researcher's academic background. More broadly, psychological methodology needs to take into account the contribution of subtle conversational cues to participants' responses in studies of the self.

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