

On being sad and evasive: Affective influences on verbal communication strategies in conflict situations

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Abstract

Does mood influence people's tendency to engage in evasive, equivocal communication when facing conflict situations? Based on recent affect–cognition theories and research on verbal communication, this experiment predicted that negative mood should increase, and positive mood decrease the level of verbal evasiveness in conflict situations, and that high situational conflict should magnify these mood effects. Participants underwent a happy or sad audiovisual mood induction, and then produced verbal responses to low- and high-conflict situations using structured as well as open-ended responses. Results indicated that affect and conflict severity had an interactive influence on evasiveness and equivocation: negative affect produced significantly more evasiveness than positive affect, and these effects were greater in high than in low-conflict situations. These results are discussed in terms of the cognitive strategies that mediate mood effects on verbal communication. The implications of the findings for everyday communication situations, and for current affect–cognition theorizing are considered. Crown Copyright © 2004 Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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Language is the primary medium of social life and is essential to establish and maintain a sense of self, to exchange ideas, feelings and thoughts, and to establish a mutual understanding of the world (e.g., Fiedler & Semin, 1992; Forgas, 1985, 1999b; Mead, 1934). Finding the right words when communicating a potentially difficult message can be a complex and demanding cognitive task. Surprisingly, we still know very little about how short-term moods may influence people's verbal communication strategies in conflict situations. This paper seeks to extend recent work on the role of affect in social cognition to the domain of verbal communication, by demonstrating that temporary good or bad moods can have a systematic and predictable influence on verbal communication strategies such as the use of evasive, equivocal messages.

Verbal communication often presents communicators with a double-avoidance conflict, when they need to satisfy contradictory requirements, for example, of

being honest, yet not giving offence (Bavelas, 1985; Forgas, 1985, 1999a, 1999b). Despite the importance of communication in social life, the effects of mood states on strategic language use have received limited empirical attention to date. Yet recent research on affect and cognition suggests that affective states can have a particularly marked influence on demanding interpersonal tasks that require more elaborate, substantive processing such as verbal communication (Fiedler, 2001; Forgas, 1995, 1998, 2002; Sedikides, 1995). Extrapolating from recent affect–cognition theories, we expected that communicators experiencing negative mood should adopt a more cautious, evasive, and equivocal communication style. This is most likely due to their mood-congruent tendency to evaluate conflict situations as more difficult and aversive (Bless, 2002; Bower, 1981; Fiedler, 2001; Forgas, 1999a, 1999b), although other theoretical explanations are also possible (see below). Further, greater levels of situational conflict should also magnify mood effects due to the more elaborate, extensive processing strategies they recruit.

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Equivocation and evasiveness in communication

Until the early 1950s, most language researchers assumed that ‘normal’ verbal communication should be effective, efficient, and noise-free, and studies focused on communication as it ‘should’ be rather than as it actually was (Bavelas, Black, Chovil, & Mullett, 1990). The study of pragmatics, language as it is used in a social context, identified four maxims that guide conversations (Grice, 1975): quantity (messages should contain sufficient information), quality (messages should be truthful), relation (messages should be relevant), and manner (information should be clear). Thus, to communicate efficiently people should speak honestly, relevantly, and clearly while providing adequate information. Deviations from these maxims were regarded as suboptimal and ineffective (Bavelas et al., 1990).

In fact, verbal communication often deviates from these ideal requirements (Grice, 1975) and messages that break these rules can serve important functions (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). One way of dealing with conflict situations to be assessed here is to be *evasive*: at one extreme, this includes telling lies. Another common response is *equivocation*. We may define equivocal communications as non-straightforward messages that may be intentionally ambiguous, contradictory or evasive (Bavelas, 1985); indeed, their very objective is a systematic avoidance of perfect clarity. This definition is similar to, but not identical with Bavelas’s (1985) notion of ‘disqualified’ communication. Equivocal messages allow communicators to ‘say something without really saying it’ or ‘say nothing while saying something’ (Bavelas et al., 1990, p. 21). Examples of equivocal communication include self-contradictions, inconsistencies, tangentializations, incomplete sentences, and metaphors (Watzlawick et al., 1967). Whereas a direct message would express “*I am saying this to you in this situation,*” an equivocal message would circumvent one or more of the four basic elements of direct communication (Haley, 1959). Equivocation can be measured in terms of the degree of deviation from clarity on the dimensions of sender, content, receiver, and context (Bavelas, 1985). Interestingly, the influence of temporary mood states on evasiveness and equivocation has not been examined previously; this will be the main objective of this study.

The functions of equivocation

When all the available response alternatives are undesirable communicators face an avoidance–avoidance conflict. For example, when a friend asks us to comment on his/her obviously bad performance, there are no easy options: the choice is between being honest and upsetting his/her feelings, or lying but keeping the friendship.

An equivocal message such as saying ‘you did as well as anyone could’ can evade this conflict, leaving the interpretation up to the receiver. Research has confirmed that the necessary and sufficient “cause of equivocation is a communicative avoidance–avoidance conflict” (Bavelas et al., 1990, p. 262). The stronger the conflict, the greater should be the degree of equivocation, a hypothesis that will be investigated here; further, greater conflict intensity should also accentuate mood effects on equivocation. A related way that communicators can deal with conflict is to be *evasive*; at one extreme, telling a lie represents a clearly evasive, avoidant but not necessarily equivocal or ambiguous communication. We investigated the effects of mood and level of situational conflict both on *evasiveness* (using structured response alternatives) and on *equivocation* (using open-ended responses) here.

Affect and communication

Affect was traditionally regarded as a dangerous and invasive influence on ‘normal’ thinking and behaviour; philosophers from Plato to Koestler have argued that emotionality is destructive and interferes with rational thinking. Recent cognitive and neuropsychological evidence however has shown that affect is often a necessary and adaptive influence on social judgements and decisions (Adolphs & Damasio, 2001; Ito & Cacioppo, 2001). The term affect may be used to refer both to emotions and moods (Forgas, 1995, 2002). Emotions are highly intensive, of short duration and have much cognitive content. Moods, in contrast, have low intensity, are of longer duration and tend to be cognitively empty. Because moods tend to ‘linger’ and are less open to conscious awareness they often have a greater and more insidious effect on memory, judgments, and behaviours (Forgas, 2002).

Moods were found to have both informational and processing effects on thinking and behaviour. Informational effects occur when moods influence the *content* of thinking, due either to the selective recall and use of mood-congruent memories and information (Bower, 1991; Eich & Macaulay, 2000), or the use of mood as a heuristic cue to guide responses (Clore, Gasper, & Garvin, 2001; Schwarz, 1990). People in a negative mood tend to recall more negative memories, and should make more negative and pessimistic inferences about conflict-laden communication situations (Bower, 1981, 1991; Forgas, 1999a, 1999b; Schwarz, 1990). Extrapolating from past evidence, we expected here that such a negativity bias in the way the situation is perceived should produce an increase in evasiveness and equivocation.

Mood can also influence the *process* of thinking. Negative moods seem to focus attention on accommo-

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