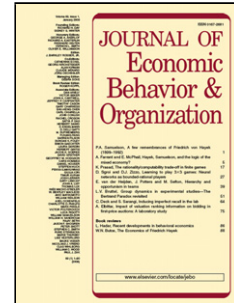


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Experimental Methods: When and Why Contextual Instructions are Important

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Highlights

- Using abstract context has been seen as a way to achieve control in experiments.
- But meaningful context can aid in understanding and reduce confusion.
- The use of context can be seen as expanding the researcher's toolkit

Abstract: An important methodological issue in experimental research is the extent to which one should use context-rich or abstract language in the instructions for an experiment. The traditional use of abstract context in experimental economics is commonly viewed as a way to achieve experimental control. However, there are some advantages to using context-framed instructions, such as “employer and worker” instead of “player 1 and player 2.” Meaningful context can enhance understanding of an environment and reduce confusion among participants, particularly when a task requires sophisticated reasoning, and hence may yield responses of better quality. In emotionally-charged research questions, such as pollution or bribes, contextual instructions may affect behavior in the experiment, but this effect may be appropriate as it relates to the research question. Our review of the evidence from the literature indicates that in the great majority of cases meaningful language is either useful or produces no change in behavior. Nevertheless, a few important considerations are worth keeping in mind when using rich context. Finally, we see the choice of context as being an expansion of the experimenter's toolkit and a factor to consider in experimental design.

Keywords: Experiments, methodology, context, meaningful language, quality of responses

JEL codes: C90, C91, C92, C93, C99

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