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Influence of Context on the Perception of Violence

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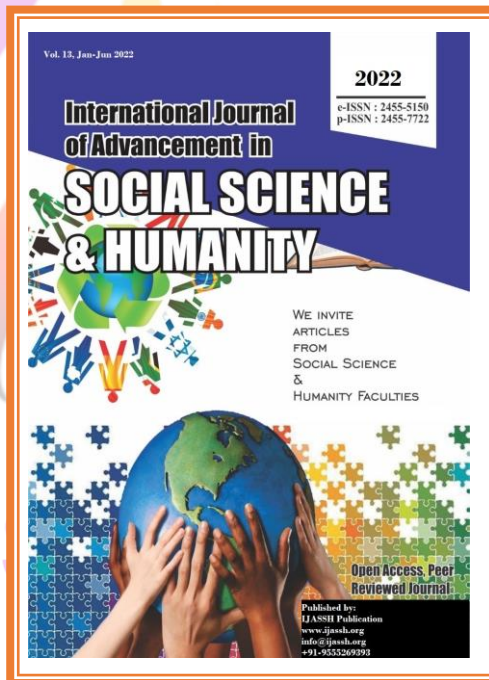
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ABSTRACT

This research investigated whether context influences the perception of a viewed violent physical human action. It was studied whether context influences perception of the violent act in terms of the severity of the violence displayed by the perpetrator and the perceived intensity of the pain experienced by the victim. It was also investigated whether context in fact guided the perception of the act as an assault or battery. It was found that context influenced both the perception of violence by the perpetrator and the pain felt by the victim. Though subjective estimates were influenced by context the objective interpretation of the act as an assault or battery was not influenced. This is relevant as it shows how witnessing a human action involves contextual influence and that what we see is not what we perceive.

Social discourse in the present day seems to be directed by permissions and taboos on the discussion regarding certain topics. The 'cancel culture' prevalent vociferously on social media is a pertinent reflection of this. A subsequent consequence of this could be behavioral in the form of people being threatened by physical violence or in fact being physically attacked in response to spoken words. Such acts are on the rise with comedians being attacked on stage in response to certain jokes they have made. Where some might claim that there exist certain offlimit topics which comedians or other commentators must avoid ridiculing, there exists an opinion that freedom of speech is absolute. Regardless of the viewpoint, it is pertinent to ask whether the action of physically hitting someone in response to hurtful words would be perceived as violence and in fact as 'battery'. And do hurtful words, or certain topics provide a mitigating context which makes people perceive the violent act as less violent.

There is a large consensus in psychological research data that context influences perception. (Balcetis & Dunning, 2006). It has been shown that physiological states like being thirsty, a physiological

motivational state, made participants perceive obscure stimuli as more transparent (Changizi & Hall 2001).

Though largely this influence is researched in terms of object perception (Li & Warren, 2004), or how priming influences the perception of ambiguous figures (Long & Toppino, 2004), research on how context guides perception of overt behavior is still unclear. Loftus and Palmer (1974) famously showed how the use of varying intensity of verbs like 'smashed' or 'collided' made participants provide varying estimates of the speed of a car they saw crashing in a video when the crash occurred. As such, how context interacts with memory of events is studied. This research investigates whether such an influence of context shows up in the perception of a human action, especially a violent act.

Assault refers to 'a threat or attempt to inflict offensive physical contact or bodily harm on a person that puts the person in immediate danger of or in apprehension of such harm or contact' (*Assault definition & meaning* 2022). Whereas battery refers to 'an offensive touching or use of force on a person without the person's consent' (*Battery definition & meaning* 2022).

Battery therefore appears to be a more serious offense than assault as it involves an actual contact between the perpetrator and the victim . This research aims to investigate whether context could influence the perception of a violent act to be judged differently.

Commission of an unethical or wrongful act could stir up unpleasant emotions within an individual. People are known to engage in a process of ‘moral disengagement’ to reduce the negative aspects of the behavior. Moral disengagement is the process where agents detach the moral aspect from an unacceptable behavior to rationalize it (Bandura et al., 1996; Bandura, 1999, 2015). In detaching the negative moral connotations individuals resort to a cognitive reconstruction by obscuring or distorting harmful actions, (Bandura, 1999, 2015). Though moral disengagement is a process pertaining to the actions of oneself, it is unclear about how this process manifests in the perception of the harmful action of others. Hence the present study aims to address this gap to study how this effect functions in mitigating the negative nature of harmful acts of others. Moral disengagement is thus a multi dimensional mechanism which helps individuals to mitigate undesirable emotional consequences during the justification of unethical acts. (Tillman et al, 2018). This research investigated whether moral disengagement helps alter the very perception of an unethical act to justify the act.

Cognitions of an opposing nature create an unsettling experience which propels people to mitigate this situation by manipulating one cognition to fit the other (Festinger, 1957). This is generally known as

cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance usually pertains to the action of the persons themselves however it could be argued that viewing and judging an unethical or violent act of another (Person A) especially when done in response to a wrongful or unacceptable behavior of someone else (Person B) could also vicariously lead to a cognitive dissonance within the viewer of the act (Person C). Moral rationalization in this situation would be the viewer’s (Person C’s) attempt to reduce the dissonance by using the wrongful act (or context) of (Person B) the as a tool to justify the violent act of Person A.

A key question posed by this research is also whether context could serve as a mechanism to aid individuals in the process of moral disengagement. Context has an effect on how we perceive events. Certain actions would be considered appropriate under certain contexts and would be considered inappropriate under certain other contexts. The severity of this perceptive discrepancy is augmented when the perceptive judgment is regarding an action which incurs physical or emotional damage on another person. This is relevant in social justice and to decide the course of legal remedies in litigation which pertain to assaults and batteries. Where the nature of the decision and quantum of punishment depends on the severity and often the perceived severity of the act.

This research aimed to answer whether context provides a medium of moral disengagement and alters the perception of the act itself. Alteration in perception was measured on the parameters of 1. Perception of the nature of the act, 2. Perception of the severity of the act, 3.

Justification of the act and 4. Whether the act constituted an assault or battery.

AIM

To study the influence of context on the perception of a violent act.

Operational definition of variables

Independent variable

Context provided before the viewing of the video.

- Control Group: No context
- Experimental group 1: Context mental health
- Experimental group 2: Context choice of spouse

Dependent variables

- Perception of the act operationalised as whether the action was perceived as violent or not.
- Perceived severity of the act operationalised as
 - (1) The perceived level of violence shown by the perpetrator
 - (2) The perceived level of pain experienced by the victim
- Justification of the act operationalised by the participants indicating whether they believe the perpetrator was justified in engaging in the violent act
- Whether the act would be viewed as an assault or battery operationalized by the participants indicating whether they believe the perpetrator had committed assault or battery.

METHOD

Sample

A sample of 75 adults ranging from 18 to 60 years of age were part of the study. The sample was 32 % male and 68% female.

Design

The study utilized an independent measures design. Three groups were created by segregating the sample into one of three groups. (1) no context group, (2) context mental health group and (3) context choice of spouse group.

Tools

Responses were gathered via google forms. The forms required participants to view a video of an interviewer asking a question and then being slapped by the interviewee. The forms were of three types form 1, no context, form 2 context mental health and form 3, context choice of spouse.

Procedure

The Google forms required participants to first view a video of an interviewer asking a question and then being slapped by the interviewee and then participants had to answer questions pertaining to how they perceived the action of the interviewee and one specific question regarding whether the action of the interviewee constituted an assault or a battery.

All three groups were provided the same silent video and a similar description of what was asked to the interviewee. The only difference was the description of the supposed question which the interviewer had asked the interviewee. In the no

context group it was only told that the interviewer asked a question to the interviewee and he reacted by slapping the interviewer. In the context 'mental health' group it was told that the interviewer asked a question to the interviewee regarding a mental health issue he was experiencing and the interviewee reacted by slapping the interviewer. In the context 'choice of spouse' group it was told that the interviewer asked a question to the interviewee regarding his selection of a spouse and the interviewee and he reacted by slapping the interviewer. In the video the interviewee was shown to have slapped the interviewer and thus clearly has committed a battery. Definitions of both assault and battery were provided in the google form before the question pertaining to the perception of the act as an assault or battery.

HYPOTHESES

Context and the perception of the severity of the act

To find out whether context influences the perception of the severity of violence displayed the following hypotheses were created.

Hypothesis 1: People in the no context group will provide higher ratings for the level of violence for the interviewee's actions as compared to the context mental health group.

Hypothesis 2: People in the no context group will provide higher ratings for the level of violence for the interviewee's actions as compared to the context choice of the spouse group.

Hypothesis 3: There will be no difference in the ratings for the level of violence for the interviewee's actions between the

context mental health group and context choice of spouse group.

To find out whether context influences the perception of the level of pain experienced by the interviewer the following hypotheses were created.

Hypothesis 4: People in the no context group will provide higher ratings for the level of pain experienced by the interviewer as compared to the people in the context mental health group.

Hypothesis 5: People in the no context group will provide higher ratings for the level of pain experienced by the interviewer as compared to the people in the context choice of the spouse group.

Hypothesis 6: There will be no difference in the ratings for the level of pain experienced by the interviewer between the context mental health group and context choice of spouse group.

Context and the justification of the act

Hypothesis 7: There is no relationship between context and the justification for the violent action.

RESULTS

Whether the action was perceived as violent or not.

With regards to the perception of the action of the interviewee as being violent or not, 100% for the participants in the no context condition found the action violent whereas 84% participants in the context mental health condition and 100% participants in the context choice of spouse perceived the action as violent.

Context	Violent	Not Violent
No Context	100%	0%
Context Mental Health	84%	16%
Context Choice of Spouse	100%	0%

Table 1. Percentage of participants in each condition who perceived the act as violent or not.

Whether the act would be viewed as an assault or battery

With respect to whether the action of the interviewee was perceived as assault or battery, 80% of the participants in the no context condition, 100% of the participants in the context mental health condition and 80% of the participants in the context choice of spouse condition perceived the interviewee’s action as a battery.

Context	Assault	Battery
No Context	20%	80%
Context Mental Health	0%	100%
Context Choice of Spouse	20%	80%

Table 2. Percentage of participants in each condition who perceived the act as an Assault or Battery.

Participants in the no context group ($M = 7, SD = 0.91$) provided significantly higher ratings for the level of perceived violence than participants from the context mental health group ($M = 5.52, SD = 2.6, t(48) = 2.68, p = .004$). Thus the research hypothesis that people in the no context group will provide higher ratings for the level of violence for the interviewee’s actions as compared to the context mental health group is accepted.

There was no significant difference between the ratings for the level of perceived violence $t(48) = -0.95, p = .17$, despite the context choice of spouse group ($M = 7.4, SD = 1.89$). providing higher ratings for perceived violence than the no context group ($M = 7, SD = .91$). Thus the hypothesis that people in the no context group will provide higher ratings for the level of violence for the interviewee’s actions as compared to the context choice of the spouse group is rejected.

Participants in the context choice of the spouse group ($M = 7.4, SD = 1.89$) provided significantly higher ratings for the level of perceived violence than participants from the context mental health group ($M = 5.52, SD = 2.6, t(48) = -2.92, p = .002$). Thus the hypothesis of no difference in the ratings for the level of violence for the interviewee’s actions between the context mental health group and context choice of spouse group is rejected as participants in the choice of spouse context condition perceived the act as more violent that participants in the mental health context condition.

There was no significant difference between the ratings for the level of pain experienced by the interviewer $t(48) = -1.43, p = .07$, despite the no context group ($M = 6.2, SD = 1.63$), providing higher ratings than the context mental health group ($M = 5.56, SD = 1.52$). Thus the hypothesis that people in the no context group will provide higher ratings for the level of pain experienced by the interviewer as compared to the people in the context mental health group is rejected.

Participants in the no context group ($M = 6.2, SD = 1.63$) provided significantly lower ratings for level of pain experienced by the interviewer than participants from the context choice of spouse group ($M = 7.2, SD = 1.75$), $t(48) = -2.08, p = .02$. Therefore the hypothesis that people in the no context group will provide higher ratings for the level of pain experienced by the interviewer as compared to the people in the context choice of the spouse group is accepted.

Participants in the context choice of spouse group ($M = 7.2, SD = 1.75$) provided significantly higher ratings for level of pain experienced by the interviewer than participants from the context mental health group ($M = 5.56, SD = 1.52$), $t(48) = -3.52, p = .0004$. Therefore the hypothesis that there will be no difference in the ratings for the level of pain experienced by the interviewer between the context mental health group and context choice of spouse group is rejected.

Perception of whether the act was justified or not

Higher number of people in the context mental health group suggested that there were reasons which justified the interviewee’s action rather than both the

no context and context choice of spouse groups. 40% people in the no context group, 76% people in the context mental health group and 20% people in the context choice of spouse group indicated that the action of the interviewee was justified.

Context	Justified	Not Justified
No Context	40%	60%
Context Mental Health	76%	24%
Context Choice of Spouse	20%	80%

Table. 3. Percentage of participants in each condition who suggested that the action of the interviewee was justified.

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relation between context mental health and the justification for the violent act. The relation between these variables was significant, $X^2 (1, N = 75) = 16.24, p = .0002$. A violent action was justified when it was provided a context rather than when not provided with a context.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The participants in the context mental health condition perceived the interviewee's action as least violent as compared to the no context and context choice of spouse conditions suggesting that the context of mental health could have been used as a tool of rationalization and made individuals perceive the behavior as less violent than individuals who were not provided any context before viewing the video. Participants could have considered the context of mental health as a more serious issue not to be inquired upon disrespectfully as compared to inquiries into the choice of a spouse as participants in the latter condition did not perceive the act significantly differently than the no context group. This could suggest that being asked a question regarding the choice of spouse was not seen as a justifiable excuse to display a retaliatory violent action. Making the act look more violent to this group than the other two groups.

Having a context of a possibly intruding question regarding the interviewee's recent mental health issue did influence the perception of the level of violence displayed by the interviewee. This finding could suggest that the context of the violent behavior could have acted as a moral rationalization which influenced the very perception of the act as less violent. Though largely all three groups clearly perceived the act as violent, however in the context mental health group there was a slight evidence of a view that the act was not violent. This could reflect a possible opinion that asking questions about a person's mental health in an interview

could be seen as rude and that retaliation in response to this line of inquiry could be viewed as justified.

Therefore as with object perception (Li & Warren, 2004), context does seem to influence the perception of physical actions. Providing context for the violent act did in fact guide the sample to view the act as less violent. Just as found by Loftus and Palmer (1974) with respect to memory, this research found that the context influences the perceived quality of a violent act itself.

The participants in the context choice of spouse group indicated a higher level of pain experienced by the victim (interviewer) as compared to the other two groups. The lowest level of pain was indicated by the context mental health group. One possibility could be that the pain experienced by the interviewer in the context choice of spouse was perceived as unwarranted as it was in response to a topic which was not seen as being as disrespectful as a question regarding mental health and therefore was perceived as being more painful. Another additive factor is the finding that a higher number of participants in the context choice of spouse group stated that there was not much justification for the interviewee's action as compared to the other two groups.

These findings taken together suggest that rationalization of the violent behavior viewed worked on both the action (the slap) and the effect of the action (the intensity of the pain). The process of moral disengagement therefore seems to be influential in the perception of the perpetrator's behavior and the victim's predicament. This is an important finding

especially in the legal field as often the degree of violence of the act is integral to the quantum of punishment and this is also relevant for eyewitness testimony where subjective influence might not be contained to the reconstructive aspect of memory but also the initial perception of the act itself in both its commission and its impact.

This research found that context and justification were related. This suggests that context was a strong tool to help participants justify and therefore rationalize the violent act of the interviewee. Context can help reduce cognitive dissonance created in the pursuit of justifying a violent act. Thus justification and context both could have worked in independent ways involving different cognitive pathways to reduce both the perceived level of violence on the part of the perpetrator and the perceived level of pain experienced by the victim.

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