

Status Effects on Reactions to Communication Norm Violations

Carolyn Axtell & Karin S Moser

Communication practices within organisation are governed by norms about what is appropriate within the workplace. Email is a dominant form of organisational communication. However, even though it has been around for a long time, there is still ambiguity over what is considered appropriate email behaviour, with variation between different groups and contexts (Gilson, Maynard, Young, Vartiainen & Hakonen, 2014).

As a fairly lean medium, email has relatively few social cues available which can lead to more extreme and inaccurate impressions when evaluating the sender (Walther, 2007). This might be further exacerbated by social identity processes as individuals tend to overlook transgressions made by their in-group (Lea & Spears, 1992). Consequently, email violations by out-group members may be subject to more negative reactions.

One important aspect of group identity is social status. Status, e.g. as a function of professional groups or organisational hierarchies, is often used as a means of categorisation in organisations, and regulates group processes and behaviour at work. With regards to communications, there may be different expectations of what is appropriate depending on the status of the recipient and the sender. For example, individuals tend to alter their email formality when writing to those of higher status (Postmes, Spears & Lea, 2000), and emails that do not match the expectations of higher status individuals can have a negative effect on their reactions and intention to cooperate (Stephens, Houser, & Cowan, 2009). Thus, violating these status-related expectations is likely to hamper collaborative outcomes.

As violations are related to perceived harm, emotional reactions can be triggered (Frijda, 1986). Such reactions can affect behavioural tendencies which may extend from ‘move away’

tendencies (e.g., ignoring the perpetrator) to more aggressive ‘move against’ tendencies, (e.g., directly reprimanding the perpetrator). Moreover, given the poor contextual information available in virtual environments, negative personal attributions about norm violations are more likely than positive attributions or situational attributions (Cramton, 2001). Given the tendency to overlook in-group transgressions (Lea & Spears, 1992) we might still expect more favourable in-group attributions and less positive out-group ones.

Following Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), we predict that individuals are likely to perceive violations and exhibit reactions with respect to group identity, with in-group favouritism and out-group biases. Thus, we hypothesise that emotional, attributional and behavioural reactions to email norm violation will be more negative towards out-group members (H1). In addition, we expect that status will have an effect, such that there will be different types of reactions depending on the status of the sender and recipient (H2). Specifically, as a result of exercising more social control we expect the most negative reactions to come from those of high status towards those of lower status. For the low status receiver, however, we would expect less strong reactions towards those of higher status. Those of low status may feel less power to do anything about transgressions by high status individuals and thus moderate their reactions accordingly. We test these hypotheses with two studies, one within a higher education setting and the other within a hospital setting, as both contexts tend to have strong subgroup and status demarcations.

STUDY 1 - METHOD

A 2 (participant status) x 2 (sender status) experimental design was used in which participants (students vs. lecturers) either ‘received’ an email from an in-group member or an out-group member (students vs. lecturers). Two online surveys (one with student as sender and

one with lecturer as sender) were developed and lecturer and student participants were randomly allocated to one of the conditions. Participants (177 students and 53 lecturers) were from a British University. The email vignette displayed in each condition was exactly the same. The instructions just before the vignette specified the status of the sender (either a lecturer or a student). The vignette contained a number of grammatical errors and formality norm violations in terms of the address ('Hi' – with no name), texting short cut ('r' instead of 'are'), a spelling error, number substitution ('2' instead of 'to'), incomplete sentence and an informal sign off ('Cheers'). The message sender was requesting a meeting with the recipient to discuss some research. Measures included perceived norm violation, emotional response (anger; happiness), positive internal attributions (e.g., verbally fluent, competent, lively, lazy (the latter reverse scored)) and behavioral tendency (willingness to comply; move against – confront, move away – avoid/ignore). Control measures included age, gender, ethnicity, familiarity with online technology, perceived familiarity with the sender.

STUDY 1 - RESULTS

Analysis of variance demonstrated a significant interaction effect between sender and recipient status on whether recipients perceived a significant norm violation ($F_{(1,203)}=5.57$, $p<.05$). In support of H1, this indicated an out-group bias effect with students perceiving more of a violation for lecturer senders and lecturers perceiving more violation for students.

In terms of emotional reactions to emails, analysis confirmed that more anger ($F_{(1,211)}=10.65$, $p<.001$) was experienced when the sender of the email was from an out-group, again supporting H1. There were some differences in reactions depending on status such that lecturers received less negative reactions from students than students did from lecturers. Findings for happiness indicated only a main effect for sender status, with more happiness directed

towards lecturer senders for both groups of recipient ($F_{(1,211)}=15.61, p<.001$). There was a main effect of status for some of the behavioural reactions (supporting H2) with lower status senders receiving more ‘move against’ reactions and higher status recipients displaying more ‘move against’ tendencies ($F_{(1,211)} = 6.55, p<.05$). A significant interaction effect ($F_{(1,211)} = 22.31, p<.001$) indicated that lecturers reported more ‘move against’ tendency for student senders whilst students reported more move against tendencies towards lecturers showing out-group bias (H1). For compliance, there was a significant main effect of sender status ($F_{(1,211)} = 7.52, p<.05$) with all recipients more likely to comply with lecturer senders. No differences were found in relation to the positive attributions. Thus, there is partial support for H1 and H2 for the emotional and behavioural reactions, but not for attributions.

STUDY 2 – METHOD

Study 2 adopted a similar methodology to the previous study, but this time using a 2 (recipient status) x 3 (senders status) between subjects design. In this instance, whilst the ‘recipients’ were categorised as either ‘high’ or ‘low’ status, ‘sender’ status was either the same, higher or lower than the recipient. The participants were 93 Health care professionals; from 13 different professions. The study used three online surveys and participants were randomly allocated to one of the three surveys. The online surveys differed only in information regarding the participant’s group identity i.e. whether the sender’s status was the same, higher or lower than their own. The email vignette was very similar to that used in study 1, but was about a particular ‘case’ that the recipient might be interested in. The measures were the same as in study 1.

STUDY 2 - RESULTS

The findings were similar to that found in study 1 except that within the healthcare

setting the status effects were more pronounced in relation to perceived norm violation and attributions. For instance, more norm violation was perceived by higher status recipients overall ($F_{(1,88)} = 5.38, p < .05$). Status differences were found in relation to attributions, with fewer positive attributions made by higher status recipients overall irrespective of status of sender ($F_{(1,85)} = 11.90, p < .001$). Otherwise the behavioural and emotional reactions were very similar to that found in study 1, again partially supporting H1 & H2.

DISCUSSION

The findings of Study 1 and Study 2 indicate that intergroup reactions may be sensitive to even relatively mild formality violations. Several instances of out-group bias were found. However, status also has an impact on the intensity of reactions with the most negative reactions directed to those of lower status. High status seems to protect senders against the harshest reactions. In relation to behavioural outcomes, this is likely to be due to fewer options to carry out behavioural sanctions on the part of the lower status recipient. There appear to be more pronounced status effects within the Healthcare setting in relation to perceptions of degree of norm violation and for positive attributions perhaps because status differences are also related to professional differences within such settings (e.g., doctors vs nurses) which might create stronger inter-group differences. Also, in study 2, all participants are professionals, whereas in the HE setting of study 1, students are not. Students are known to be generally cooperative, but they are also seeking a qualification which their lecturers can give or withhold, so the samples differ both in terms of dependency and levels of professionalism. These findings illustrate how status can impact the level of out-group bias reactions to norm violations in email communication. Moreover, this adds the important factor of professional status to previous research on norm violations.

REFERENCES

- Cramton, C. D. (2001) The Mutual Knowledge Problem and Its Consequences for Dispersed Collaboration. *Organization Science* 12, 346-371. . DOI: 10.1287/orsc.12.3.346.10098
- Frijda, N. H. (1986). *The Emotions*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Gilson, L. L., Maynard, M. T., Jones Young, N. C., Vartiainen, M., & Hakonen, M. (2014). Virtual Teams Research: 10 Years, 10 Themes, and 10 Opportunities. *Journal of Management*. DOI: 10.1177/0149206314559946
- Lea, M. & Spears, R. (1992) *Paralanguage and social perception in computer-mediated communication*. *Journal of Organizational Computing*, 2, 321-341. DOI: 10.1090/10919399209540190
- Postmes, T., Spears, R. & Lea, M. (2000) The formation of group norms in computer mediated communication. *Human Communication Research*, 26, 341-371
- Stephens, K. K., Cowan R. L., & Houser, M. L. (2011) Organizational norm congruency and interpersonal familiarity in e-mail: Examining messages from two different status perspectives. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* ,16 , 228–249. DOI:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2011.01537.x
- Tajfel, H. & Turner, J. C. (1986) The social identity theory of intergroup relations. In S. Worchel & W. G. Austin (Eds.), *Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (pp. 7-24). Chicago: Nelson-Hall.
- Walther, J. B., (2007) Selective self-presentation in computer-meditaed communication: Hyperpersonal dimensions of technology, language and cognition. *Computers in Human Behaviour*, 23, 2538-2557