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SITUATIONS THAT LEAD TO DISQUALIFICATION

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Disqualification is nonstraightforward communication—messages that are ambiguous, indirect, or evasive to some degree. A previous paper defined and measured disqualification as deviations from the direct "*I* am saying *this* to *you* in this *situation*"—that is, as relative ambiguity in sender, content, receiver, or context. The present article addresses the question of what causes such messages. An interpersonal, situational theory is proposed and tested in a series of five experiments, using a forced-choice among written messages in systematically varied, hypothetical situations. Subjects chose the most disqualified messages overwhelmingly when placed in a "bind." They did so significantly more than when in a nonbind or a merely unpleasant situation. The last two experiments defined a "bind" as an avoidance-avoidance conflict and showed that disqualified messages were chosen only in these, and not in approach-approach conflicts. The conclusion is that disqualification is not a failure of the communicator, nor even a changeworthy behavior, but a reasonable response to an impossible situation, one that permits the sender to leave the field communicationally.

In the middle of a political rally, a heckler pressed the incumbent on a controversial issue, shouting, "Why doesn't the government create more jobs?" The smiling candidate replied, "It's my birthday tonight, and I'm not going to get angry at anyone."[1]

When faced with messages that are ambiguous or unresponsive, one can propose three different explanations: (1) *error* in some part of the communicational sequence, which might occur randomly at any point, to anyone; (2) *individual differences* in communicative ability or pathology; or (3) some systematic *situational* antecedent that leads to the choice of such messages. The first two explanations focus on the sender as the cause or source of the aberrant message. That is, the sender was the victim of an error in his/her reception, processing, encoding, or transmission; or the sender is unskilled, deviant, or a bad communicator. To the extent that our theoretical (and often intuitive) bias is monadic, these are appealing, "natural" explanations, and the social situation is not examined, because it does not seem necessary to do so. However, authors in a number of disciplines have pointed out that human communication is not always logical or straightforward, but they have hesitated to call such communication deviant or erroneous (e.g., Bateson, Jackson, Haley, & Weakland, 1956; Brown & Levinson, 1978; Grice, 1975; Nofsinger, 1976; Searle, 1975; Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967; Wiener & Mehrabian, 1968). That is, messages that violate certain linguistic standards might still be lawfully related to the social context or situation in which they occur. This article will describe a first series of experiments in support of such a position.

This research began with the kind of nonstraightforward messages that the Palo Alto group called disqualification, originally noticed in the communication of schizophrenics and their families (Haley, 1959a, 1959b; Jackson, Riskin, & Satir, 1961; Jackson & Weakland, 1961; Sluzki, Beavin, Tarnopolsky, & Verón, 1967; Watzla-

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wick, 1964; Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967; Weakland & Fry, 1962). Their theory was implicitly a situational one, in that both the schizophrenic and his/her family were described as creating impossible contexts for each other, in a vicious circle of disqualification and other bizarre communications (e.g., Sluzki et al., 1967). The thesis of this paper is that disqualification is a phenomenon frequently found in normal communication, elicited by particular interpersonal situations. The experiments that follow aimed to test this hypothesis and to clarify our understanding of such situations.

The definition and measure of disqualification used here was described in an earlier paper (Bavelas & Smith, 1982). We assumed, following Haley (1959a), that all messages should convey, explicitly or implicitly, *sender, content, receiver*, and *context*. In a perfectly straightforward message, it would be clear that *I* am saying *this* to *you* in this *situation*. "Disqualified" messages would be those that render one or more of these four basic aspects unclear. For example, the sender may give someone else's opinion, or avoid giving an opinion altogether, or give an opinion while denying it is one's own—as did Iago when asked for an opinion by Othello:

> *Othello:* Was not that Cassio parted from my wife?
> *Iago:* Cassio, my lord! No, sure, *I cannot think it*,
> That he would sneak away so guilty-like,
> Seeing you coming. (III, iii; suggested by Coulthard, 1977, p. 74; italics added)

Or, the *content* may be vague, ambiguous, or inconsistent:

> *Interviewer:* How did it happen—ah, that you went together so long before you got married? Was it circumstances, finances, or what?
> *Interviewee:* Um—haha, I don't know. I was too darn interested in what I was doin' (Int'r:mhm) I guess—and she was interested and we were all having a good time... and what the heck—ah—of course, I always say I asked her to marry me the first time I met her, but—ah, but—ah, ah, I don't know, we were just... we were engaged for a couple of years and we delayed one year because of her sister's... uh... was—more or less—let her sister get married ahead of us and her father'd passed away—and just—oh, various incidental things.... (Watzlawick, 1964, p. 20)

Disqualification in the other two aspects is illustrated in the quotation at the beginning of this article. The speaker addresses not his heckler but "anyone," and he changes context by answering a different question from the one asked (although both the content and the sender's responsibility for it are clear).

In other words, we assumed a standard or ideal of clear, direct communication, from which messages might differ by degrees in one or more aspects. While carelessness or inattention to detail might play some role, substantial disqualification is held to be systematic avoidance of perfect clarity. (This does not imply that disqualification is an undesirable, negative kind of communication—a point that will be explicitly addressed at the end of this article.)

If disqualification involves deviations in clarity of content, sender, receiver, and/or context, then it can be measured at this rather than a more global or impressionistic level. That is, the issue of how much a message is disqualified can be translated into four more specific questions:

1. How clear is this message, in terms of just *what is being said*? [content]
2. To what extent is this message the *writer's* (or speaker's) *own opinion*? [sender]
3. To what extent is the message *addressed to the other person in the situation*? [receiver]
4. To what extent is this *a direct answer to the* (implicit or explicit) *question*? [context]

Defining context as the previous message, specifically as a question to be answered, has a number of precedents. The original clinical literature on disqualification frequently emphasized tangentializations, evasions, and other changes of subject or level of communication. In their definition, Sluzki et al. (1967) explicitly equated context with the just-previous message. More generally, discourse analysts have focused on "adjacency pairs" (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973), and the conversational maxims of relevance (Grice, 1975) or of "connectedness of utterances" (Nofsinger, 1976), all of which imply a requirement to respond to the previous statement, especially if it is a question.

Note that the four questions have been expressed as continua, so there are four separate dimensions on which disqualification might occur, rather than a simple dichotomy of "good" and "bad" messages, as has been implied by concentrating on pathological communication. Finally, because of our interest in the pragmatic impact of communication, we chose to have messages scaled on these dimensions by nonexpert judges—"naive others" in Wilmot's (1980) term. The details of the method by which this was done with brief, experimenter-written messages such as used in these experiments can be found in Bavelas and Smith (1982). Research with subject-written and -spoken messages will be described in subsequent articles (Bavelas & Chovil). For present purposes, it is sufficient to know that such scaling results in highly reliable standard (z) scores for each of the four dimensions, where negative values represent relative clarity and positive values indicate some degree of disqualification on that dimension. With the reliability of this method well established (see Bavelas & Smith, 1982), these experiments will seek to establish its validity by using the scale values in a hypothesis-testing framework (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955).

EXPERIMENTS: RATIONALE AND GENERAL METHOD

Returning to the possible causes of disqualification suggested at the outset, a fundamental choice presents itself. One can either assume that there is always a "correct message" that can and should be clearly, directly delivered; failure to do so implies error or inability on the part of the sender. Or one can eschew this judgment and conceive of disqualification as a variable quality of messages that might be uttered by anyone in certain circumstances. Having taken the latter approach, the problem is to define those circumstances. Initially, our definition was fairly crude: The sender must be "on the spot" or "in a bind," in colloquial terms—meaning that he or she is caught by two or more incompatible aspects of the situation and, furthermore, is still required to communicate. The politician's dilemma, as in the introductory anecdote, is one such example. Other general cases are those in which the individual must address persons whose interests or opinions differ from each other. Also, and especially, there are many situations requiring "tact," when it would be unkind to be honest but dishonest to be kind. All of these situations proscribe both direct communication and not communicating at all. As will be seen, we proceeded from this simple thesis to eliminating alternative explanations and finally to a specific conflict theory in which disqualification is seen as the communicational equivalent of "leaving the field" in response to an avoidance-avoidance conflict.

The situations used in this series of experiments were systematically varied, hypothetical, written ones in which the subject had to choose among several brief, written replies. That is, the subject was asked to imagine him/herself in the situation described and to choose among the three or four messages offered. This method is so different from the usual approach to such problems as to want some justification. Consider the alternatives: It would be typical to explore a phenomenon such as disqualification by illustrative sequences of naturalistic discourse such as recorded dialogues (or even literary works, e.g., Watzlawick et al., 1967, chap. 5). To the extent that situations could be inferred from such records, a correlation between situation and communication could be suggested. Or, one might go further and select interactants by variables that could be expected to affect the amount of conflict and, therefore, of disqualification likely to be found (e.g., marital couples seeking counseling, or strangers with premeasured, different opinions). If successful, this would still leave open the possibility that disqualification is a product of the individuals involved, not of their situation. In order to accept or reject a situational explanation, it would be necessary to intervene even more (than by selection and recording) and to try deliberately to evoke a conflict (e.g., Ryder & Goodrich, 1966; Strodtbeck, 1954; Watzlawick, 1966), seeking to make a difficult situation and its sequelae both more probable and more causally interpretable. Creating "real" situations of sufficient impact might be ethically and/or logistically difficult, so such experiments are understandably limited to relatively weak attitudinal or intellectual issues, rather than to more intense and interpersonal ones. In any case, precise

experimental variations aimed at isolating particular situational factors are beyond the range of any of these methods.

At this point, as one moves along a continuum from naturalness to control, the apparent impossibility of choice can be resolved by clarification of goals or, rather, of the priorities among various goals. If the primary goal is to sample naturalistic communication processes, then one should embrace that end of the continuum and accept limits on theoretical, especially causal, inferences. If, at the other extreme, the primary interest is hypothesis testing, then the manipulation of properties of a situation that lends itself to manipulation is the method of choice and one accepts that these situations are not a sample of those occurring naturally—as in the present research. In both cases, subsequent and complementary work might move in the direction of the other goal. Fortunately, a monolithic decision need not be made, and no single method or metamethodological position should dominate (Cappella, 1977). Indeed, one of our interests was in seeking to add to the number of methods currently available, meanwhile fully intending to work "backward" to more naturalistic communication, as we have subsequently done.

In this particular case, the above considerations dictated experimental methods. First, the method fit the problem: The primary goal was the testing of hypotheses, not sampling for a general communication process. In other words, we were specifically interested in exploring certain properties of situations, not in recreating lifelike communication in the lab. Second, early falsification was facilitated. If a hypothesis is wrong, one is much more likely to be faced with evidence to this effect, more quickly, than with other methods whose very richness and complexity provide many alternative explanations for both success and failure. Third, the several possible disadvantages of experiments would all tend to go *against* our hypotheses, leading to disconfirmation should the method prove inappropriate. For example, if the situations were artificial and meaningless to our subjects, they would choose haphazardly—not differentially according to situational variables that left them unmoved. They would be especially immune to our attempts to create binds or conflicts if these hypothetical situations had no impact on them. Finally, if subjects were merely role playing, they would presumably choose the normative, direct messages in all cases rather than ones that were patently evasive or even bizarre. Somewhat surprisingly, then, it seems that hypothetical, "paper-and-pencil" experiments are a fairly tough proving ground in this particular case.

EXPERIMENT 1: BINDS AND DISQUALIFICATION

Purpose

The first study aimed to establish a methodology and to test the notion that individuals in a bind[2] will choose disqualified messages. Indeed, it was necessary to show that normal individuals would ever choose such messages to any extent, since both the "error" and "pathology" interpretations would predict fairly low frequency, especially among normal communicators. This was further explored by varying the instructions, asking subjects to respond either as they thought they *should,* or as they thought they actually *would,* with the difference between the two stressed for all subjects. A final goal, and one that has continued throughout this research, was to establish similar effects in more than one situation. To support our hypothesis, any effect had to be shown in at least two situations that differed in all irrelevant particulars, including the choice of messages.

Method

Stimuli. There were 144 unique stimuli, produced by 3 situations, 2 instructions, and 24 possible orders of 4 response alternatives; $n=2$ each. Each subject received a single sheet, typed by a programmable typewriter, with introductory instructions:

> Try to imagine the situation described below, as vividly as possible. Then read all the choices and indicate *which you would write* in this situation.
> Remember . . . (1) try to really put yourself in the situation, and also (2) limit yourself to just the choices given. (3) We are not interested in what you think you

TABLE 1
Amount of Disqualification and Frequency of Choice (Experiment 1)

Situation/Message	Disqualification Scale Values[a] content	sender	receiver	context	sum	f
CLASS						
A. You did very well. I really liked it.	-.35	-.78	-.38	-.63	-2.14	3
B. You were terrible; bad job.	-.50	.10	-.32	-.58	-1.30	5
C. Not well, but don't feel bad about it.	1.02	1.24	.79	-.21	2.84	48
D. You were braver than I would be!	.02	-.56	-.09	1.42	.79	39
EMPLOYEE						
A. "A" was an excellent employee; I recommend him.	-.24	-.74	-.25	-.63	-1.75	0
B. Don't hire "A"; he was not a good employee.	-.26	.62	-.32	-.51	-.47	2
C. "A" is a nice person but not a good employee.	.14	.57	.34	.77	1.71	66
D. It's been years since I employed "A", so I can't answer specifically.	.24	-.45	.24	.28	.31	28
GIFT						
A. The gift is perfect; I really love it.	.05	.11	-.02	-.70	-.56	11
B. I don't like the gift and I am going to exchange or return it.	-.17	-.11	.46	-.64	-.46	4
C. I like you, but I don't like the gift.	.08	-.11	-.34	-.03	-.40	5
D. I appreciate your thoughtfulness.	.05	.11	-.11	1.36	1.41	76

[a] These are standardized scores for the four dimensions of disqualification (described in the text and in Bavelas and Smith, 1982). Positive values indicate highly disqualified messages, while negative values mean relative clarity on that dimension.

should say, but in what you think you actually *would* say.

The other instruction used *should* in the first paragraph, and ended with

> (3) We are not interested in what you think you actually *would* say, but in what you think you *should* say.

The three situations were as follows:

> *Class:* Another student in a small class, which meets three times a week for the entire year, has just given a class presentation. It was very badly done—poorly prepared and poorly delivered. After he sits down again, he passes you a note: "How did I do?" You have to jot something down and pass it back to him. Which of the following would you write down?

Employee: You are caught in a bind between two people you know and like equally well. "*A*" is someone who worked for you some time ago; "*B*" is another person, who is thinking of hiring "*A*". The trouble is "*A*" was *not* a good employee—nice but incompetent. You must write a letter of reference about "*A*" to "*B*". Which tack would you take, that is, which of the following corresponds to the gist of the message you would write?

Gift: You have received a gift from someone you really like a lot, but the gift is awful, and you don't like it at all. Now you have to write a thank you note to that person (who lives in another province). Which of the following conveys the gist of what you would say?

Note that the situations are set up to require a written reply, so that disqualification was only possible in the verbal channel. The response alternatives for each situation are given in Table 1. These messages fall into the same four categories for each situation: (A) a direct lie, (B) the truth, (C) an attempt to state both sides of the bind, and (D) a disqualification by not answering the question directly. In each situation, the four responses were presented in all 24 possible orders.

Subjects. Two large introductory psychology classes participated at the beginning or end of a lecture period. Extra stimuli were prepared so that everyone would receive a sheet, and in case any of the sample of 288 were unusable. The sheets were randomly permuted in blocks of the six situation/instruction combinations and then handed out sequentially. Only one version was missing and not replaceable (a class-would order); final $N=287$.

Procedure. While the sheets were being handed out, the experimenter introduced and summarized the study in terms that applied to all experimental conditions, emphasizing that they should imagine the situation and limit themselves to the replies given. If they felt that another response was equally or more suitable, they could in addition write that on the back of the sheet.

Results and Discussion

The frequency of choice for each message is given in Table 1, along with their scaled disqualification values on each of the four dimensions described earlier. These are standard scores in which positive values indicate more disqualification, relative to the others in that set of messages. Disqualification of *content* means that the message is relatively unclear. Disqualification of *sender* means the writer's own opinion was not being given. Disqualification of *receiver* means the message was not clearly addressed to the other person. Disqualification of *context* means the message did not directly answer the implicit or explicit question (e.g., "Was *A* a good employee?" or "How do you like the gift I sent you?"). The fifth value given is the simple sum across all four dimensions. The scale values in all experiments reported here are averages across 7 to 11 judges, who were among Groups *A* to *E*, described in Bavelas and Smith (1982). The judges are always unaware of the bind, i.e., of the quality of the class presentation, employee, or gift.

For each situation, frequencies of choice correlate almost perfectly with "total disqualification," the sum across the four dimensions. Statistically, choices among *A* to *D* differed significantly from those expected by chance ($\chi^2=199.8$; $df=3$; $p\rightarrow\infty$). There was no effect of the would/should instruction ($\chi^2=.59$; $df=3$; $p=.90$); nor did this variable affect the choice between a straightforward truth or untruth (*A* vs. *B*). Since the responses were anonymous, it is unlikely that subjects were giving socially desirable responses; rather, it seems that what one *should* and *would* do are the same in these cases. Because another experiment, not reported here, replicated this lack of difference, only the "would" instruction was used thereafter.

These results eliminated several initially plausible outcomes, which would have been fatal to even our rough theorizing: Subjects did not choose randomly; they did not avoid the disqualified messages; and they did not choose the arguably more normal direct messages that told either the truth or a "white lie." Instead, between 80% and 98% of subjects chose the one or two messages per situation with positive summed scale values. These surprising proportions render implausible any explanations based on either error or individual differences, since both imply relatively low rates of what would be considered deviant communication.

TABLE 2
Frequencies of Choice in Bind and Nonbind Conditions (Experiment 2)

		Condition[b]	
Situation	Message[a]	Bind	Nonbind
GIFT	A	4	21
	B	0	0
	D	20	3
CLASS	A	0	23
	B	1	0
	C	13	0
	D	10	1

[a] See Table 1 for messages and their scale values.

[b] Chi-square for A + B vs. D in bind vs. nonbind gift conditions = 24.13, df = 1, $p < .000001$.
Chi-square for A + B vs. C + D in bind vs. nonbind class conditions = 25.86, df = 1, $p < .000001$.

EXPERIMENT 2: NONBIND CONTROL

Purpose

The first experiment suggested strongly that people choose disqualified messages, even in an imaginary bind. Furthermore, the surprisingly high rate of such choices argues against the several competing explanations and conceivable methodological weaknesses discussed above. Ironically, it raises a previously implausible alternative explanation, namely that such messages are common, irrespective of situation. It might for some reason be more usual to comment on the other's thoughtfulness or bravery in the gift and class situations than to choose a specific, direct response. (Note that this does not apply to the most chosen "employee" response.)

Therefore, two nonbind control conditions were constructed, by making the class presentation a good one or the gift a welcome one:

Class: Another student in a small class, which meets three times a week for the entire year, has just given a class presentation. It was very good—well prepared and well delivered. After he sits down again, he passes you a note: "How did I do?" You have to jot something down and pass it back to him. Which of the following would you write?

Gift: You have received a gift from someone you really like a lot. The gift is great, and you like it very much. The friend, who lives in another province, expects a thank-you note telling how you like the gift. So you are going to write a short note. Which of the following conveys the gist of what you would say?

The bind conditions were as in Experiment 1, with the following minor changes in both bind and nonbind versions: A specific requirement to comment on the gift was added, since this was used as the context for the judges' scaling on Dimension 4. Alternative *C* was not included in the gift situation, because it makes little sense when the gift is liked, and it was seldom chosen in Experiment 1 in any case. Alternative *C* had to be left in the class situa-

tion, because it was frequently chosen; however, there were still two plausible nonbind choices (*A* and *D*).

Method

Stimuli. The two situations and two conditions each had six possible orders of three gift alternatives ($n=8$) and 24 of four class alternatives ($n=2$). The instructions were exactly like the "would" version of Experiment 1.

Subjects and procedure. A different introductory psychology class was used; $N=96$. There were 48 subjects in each situation, 24 of whom received the bind and 24 the nonbind condition. Again, sheets were permuted so that subjects were randomly assigned to situation, condition, and order of alternatives. The procedure was identical to that of Experiment 1.

Results and Discussion

The frequencies of choice are given in Table 2. The bind condition frequencies are quite similar (proportionally) to Experiment 1. In the nonbind, few subjects chose a disqualified message, that is, one with a positive scale value. The difference in frequency of choice for bind and nonbind was highly significant (see Table 2). Clearly, our disqualified messages are seldom chosen unless the subject has been asked to imagine him/herself in a bind. They are not common clichés for the general situation.

EXPERIMENT 3: UNPLEASANTNESS CONTROL

Purpose

Several alternative explanations having been eliminated, a major one remained: Our binds were always unpleasant situations. This global unpleasantness alone (and not any more complex or specific characteristics of the situation) might produce indirect responses, either as an attempt to escape or because of a loss of focus due to general arousal.

This can be tested by the use of an unpleasant but nonbind control condition. If unpleasantness itself is sufficient to produce either errors in clarity, or indirectness as a communicational escape, then these should be equally frequent in the unpleasant nonbind as in the bind (which is necessarily also unpleasant). Modifying the class and gift situations made two unpleasant nonbind control conditions possible:

Class: You are in a class which meets three times a week for the entire year. Each student has to make an individual presentation to the class. Today you and another student gave your presentations, separately—first you, then him. You were both very scared. Yours went terribly. You were not ready yet, too nervous, and generally did a very bad job.

The other student, after you, did very well—his presentation was well prepared and well delivered. After he sits down again, he passes you a note: "How did I do?" You have to jot something down and pass it back to him. Which of the following would you write?

Gift: You have received a birthday gift from someone you really like a lot. This person's birthday is on the same day as yours, but you completely forgot it this year, and you sent nothing. The gift you received is great, and you like it very much.

The friend, who lives in another province, expects a thank-you note telling how you like the gift. So you are going to write a short note about the gift you received (without mentioning the one you didn't send). Which of the following conveys the gist of what you would say?

In the new bind versions, the person him/herself did well or remembered to send a gift.

Method

Stimuli. There were two situations, each in two conditions and with three alternatives (A=truth, B=lie, C=disqualification; see Table 3). All possible orders of alternatives were again prepared, in the same format as that of the earlier experiments. A questionnaire was attached as a second sheet. This asked, among other things, how uncomfortable the situation was to the subject.

TABLE 3
Frequencies of Choice in Bind and Unpleasant Nonbind (Experiment 3)

Situation		Message	Disqualification Scale Values					Condition[a]	
			content	sender	receiver	context	sum	Bind	Nonbind
CLASS	A.	I think you did fine.	-.38	-.58	-.58	-.52	-2.06	4	17
	B.	I think you did a bad job.	-.73	-.58	-.51	-.62	-2.44	1	0
	C.	Not bad.	1.11	1.15	.94	1.15	4.35	13	1
GIFT	A.	I really like the gift you sent. Thank you very much.	-.22	-.50	-.28	-.61	-1.61	1	11
	B.	I don't like the gift you sent.	-.31	-.51	-.15	-.54	-1.51	0	0
	C.	Thank you very much for the gift, it was very kind of you.	.53	1.01	.43	1.15	3.12	17	7

[a] Chi-square for A + B vs. C in bind and nonbind conditions: Class = 16.8, df = 1, p < .00005. Gift = 12.5, df = 1, p < .0005.

Subjects and procedure. Seventy-two students in several summer-session classes participated and were randomly assigned in the usual way; $n=3$ per order-of-alternative, condition, and situation.

Results and Discussion

Unpleasantness was manipulated as expected. Subjects who received the nonbind situations rated these as more uncomfortable than their bind counterparts did (class $t=1.24, df=34$, n.s.; gift $t=2.32$, $df=34$, $p<.05$, two-tailed).

The pattern of choice, given in Table 3, was highly significant favoring the bind hypothesis. The disqualified message (*C*) was preferred when the subject was in an imagined bind, but not when he or she was in an unpleasant, nonbind situation. In the latter case, straightforward responses were preferred. (These results were recently replicated with 12-year-olds, who responded exactly as the adults did here.)

Note that this begins to answer more precisely the question, what is a bind? It is still, globally, a situation in which the individual is caught between two incompatible alternatives and required to communicate, but it is not just any unpleasant situation. That is, it is not a bind when one feels bad about having forgotten a gift or having done poorly in a public performance. One may wish that either of these had not happened, but a choice is no longer involved, and only the unpleasantness remains. Thus, the reason for choosing the more disqualified message was not diffuse unpleasantness.

EXPERIMENT 4: CONFLICT THEORY[3]

Purpose

Having eliminated alternative explanations for the choice of disqualified messages in bind situations, we can now propose more definitely what a bind is, rather than merely what it is not. A more precise formulation can be found in Lewin's field theory, specifically his theory of conflict (Lewin, 1938; see also Barker, 1942, and Bavelas, 1978, pp. 164-165). Furthermore, this theory leads logically to a test of its own validity, as will be seen below. In brief, a bind in our terms is an *avoidance-avoidance conflict*, in which two unappealing choices repel the individual, who will

leave the field if possible—in this case, communicationally, by evasive or indirect communication. For example, both the gift and class situations offer the alternatives of telling a lie or hurting the other person (both negative alternatives in our culture), while the disqualified response avoids both of these.

Lewin's theory is not an intrapsychic but a situational one or, in modern parlance, an interactionist theory (Ekehammar, 1974), combining both person and situation. Three premises can be applied to the case of conflict: (1) Situations are represented as valences attracting or repelling the person, that is, as eliciting approach or avoidance. (2) The force of a valence, whether positive or negative, is stronger if closer; this is the "goal gradient": a positive valence becomes more attractive as one approaches it, and a negative valence becomes more repellent as one comes closer to it. (3) There is a force or tendency towards movement—either the valences vary slightly, though randomly, or the decision region itself becomes negative.

Applying the above premises to an avoidance-avoidance conflict, the individual will begin to move in one direction or another (subjectively, will begin to consider choosing one of the alternatives). However, merely approaching this alternative will make it more negative (by the goal gradient principle), and it will repel the individual, while the other alternative, now more distant, will appear less negative. Therefore, the individual will reverse course but obviously will encounter the same problem as the other alternative is approached. Thus, both alternatives will drive the person away from choice itself, towards "leaving the field," if this possibility is not closed off. In effect, our bind experiments have offered this possibility, in the form of an evasive reply: *Disqualified messages are the communicational equivalent of leaving the field.* For example, rather than choose between lying or hurting someone, it is possible to change the subject or at least to avoid the sensitive topic. Note that leaving the field is a psychological and communicational event, not a physical one. It removes the force of the two valences; it solves the interpersonal problem. The disqualified message accomplishes this by leaving the straight and narrow path of direct communication, by avoiding the directness of "I am saying this to you in this situation." One or more of these elements is skirted, because to say them all directly would require one of the unpalatable alternatives. The analogy of leaving the field may seem less farfetched or abstract when one considers the everyday terms for such communications, which are often metaphors based on physical movement: evasion, tangentialization, waffling (probably from "waff," or "waver"), straightforward, on the spot, getting off the spot, and so on.

In brief summary, Lewin's conflict theory seems worth resurrecting because it fits the present data; it combines intrapsychic and situational aspects; and it corresponds to intuitive usage and perception of such situations. However, none of these alone, nor even the current revival of interactionist positions, would be sufficient reason for dusting off an old theory merely to wrap new data in it. The main advantage of a Lewinian interpretation over other formulations, especially informal ones, is that it offers the means of its own falsification. That is, it can generate *new* predictions that would tend to confirm or disconfirm it, as will be described next.

Another kind of simple conflict arises when the individual is caught between two positive alternatives. Far from being the same as the avoidance-avoidance case, such conflicts should elicit different behavior, by the same premises: When the individual begins to move in one direction or the other, that is, begins to consider choosing one of the alternatives, this alternative will become more attractive (and the other, less). The person will therefore continue in the same direction and choose one of the alternatives rather quickly. There will be no tendency to leave the field; indeed, all vectors will act to keep the individual in the situation, on a direct path. In other words, if one of our situations offered two positive choices (only one of which were possible), the disqualified response should be ignored for one of the direct, positive messages. Thus, *a bind is an avoidance-avoidance conflict,* and never an approach-approach conflict. Situations in which each alternative has at least some negative aspect will elicit disqualification, whereas situations presenting two mutually exclusive posi-

TABLE 4
Frequencies of Choice in Different Conflict Conditions (Experiment 4)

			Disqualification Scale Values[a]					Condition[b]	
Situation		Message	content	sender	receiver	context	sum	+/+ (Approach-Approach)	-/- (Avoidance-Avoidance)
MEETING	A.	Your hair looks great that way. Your hair doesn't look good that way.	-.41	-.09	.16	-.70	-1.04	11	1
	B.	Your dress is really nice. Your dress doesn't suit you.	-.40	-.12	-.91	-.35	-1.78	2	0
	C.	Don't worry—you'll do fine.	.86	.21	.74	1.04	2.85	11	23
APPLICATION	A.	You are exceptionally easy to get along with. You are quite difficult to get along with.	-.44	-.53	-.33	-.48	-1.78	7	6
	B.	You are very intelligent. You are not very intelligent.	-.41	-.12	.02	-.53	-1.04	4	2
	C.	What do you think?	.84	.65	.31	1.01	2.81	13	16

[a] Both positive and negative versions of A and B are given; their scale values, which are virtually identical, were averaged.

[b] Chi-square for A + B vs. C in the two different conflict conditions: Meeting = 14.5, $df = 1$, $p < .0002$. Application = .78, $df = 1$, $p > .35$.

tive alternatives will not. If these two kinds of conflict produce different communicational choices, then the Lewinian model would be a good explanation.

This experiment and the next one (5) aimed to test this model, despite the substantial difficulty of creating hypothetical situations that are fairly balanced in conflict for each subject. In this respect, the format of forced choice among messages began to present advantages. The messages offered were used as the two positive (or negative) alternatives. Note that our interest here is on what a person might say rather than on what he or she might do; the latter has been the focus of previous conflict experiments (e.g., Barker, 1942, 1946). The difference is our primary interest in communicative behavior in communicative situations, not in any other behaviors in other conflict situations.

Method

Stimuli. Two new situations were devised, each of which could present a choice of two positive or two negative messages (*A* and *B*) plus the same disqualified message (*C*):

Meeting (+/+): Someone you work with arrives at a staff meeting, where she is going to present a report. She is wearing a new dress and also has a new hair style. Both are great—she really looks good. She sits down next to you and passes you a note: "How do I look?"

You are going to write a note and pass it back to her. Of the choices below, which would you write?

- Your dress is really nice.
- Your hair looks great that way.
- Don't worry—you'll do fine.

Meeting (−/−): Someone you work with arrives at a staff meeting, where she is going to present a report. She is wearing a new dress and also a new hair style. Both are awful—she really looks bad. She sits down next to you and passes you a note: "How do I look?"

You are going to write a note and pass it back to her. Of the choices below, which would you write?

- Your dress doesn't suit you.
- Your hair doesn't look good that way.
- Don't worry—you'll do fine.

Application (+/+): Someone you know quite well is filling out a job application. He is both bright and a really nice person—easy to get along with and intelligent as well.

He asks for your advice about filling out the application. In particular, one of the questions is, "What is your most important good quality?" and he wonders what to say. You are interrupted by a phone call, so he says to leave him a note with what you think is his most important good quality.

If you had to choose from the following three replies, which would you write?

- You are very intelligent.
- You are exceptionally easy to get along with.
- What do you think?

Application (−/−): Someone you know quite well is filling out a job application. He is not very bright and also not a particularly nice person—neither easy to get along with nor intelligent.

He asks for your advice about filling out the application. In particular, one of the questions is, "What is your most important fault?" and he wonders what to say. You are interrupted by a phone call, so he says to leave him a note with what you think is his most important fault.

If you had to choose from the following three replies, which would you write?

- You are not very intelligent.
- You are quite difficult to get along with.
- What do you think?

The order of A and B, and the order of reference to them in the text, was varied in four permutations, but C was always the third and last alternative. A questionnaire was attached as a second sheet.

Subjects and procedure. Ninety-six summer-session students participated in their classes and were randomly assigned to condition in the usual way; $n=6$ per unique combination of situation, kind of conflict, and order of alternative.

Results and Discussion

The frequencies of choice are given in Table 4. The meeting situation produced a significant effect as predicted; subjects chose the disqualified message more frequently in the avoidance-avoidance than approach-approach version.

However, the prediction failed for the job application situation, which showed no difference between conflict conditions. Our interpretation, based on subjects' questionnaire responses, is that the intended approach-approach condition was not free of negative aspects. If one of the positive statements were recommended, and it turned out to be the wrong line to take with that employer, then the subject would feel responsible for the friend's not getting the job; that is, it is better not to advise someone, because the advice may be wrong. To a lesser degree, possible practical consequences may have been a factor in the meeting situation as well, in that some subjects said they chose the disqualified reply for fear of demoralizing the person and ruining her report; or, they interpreted her question as seeking reassurance, which they did not wish to withhold. Either of these alternative explanations would mean that the results for the meeting situation do not exclusively support conflict theory.

This implies that it is important, when one is manipulating the kind of conflict, to distinguish between communication that has consequences solely for the relationship and communication that has further practical consequences. In the latter case, it may be difficult to create situations free of negative consequences; that is, even positive messages may carry the risk of being responsible for another's choice or actions, and the disqualified alternative may therefore be chosen to avoid this risk.

It is important to emphasize, however, that these are entirely post hoc explanations of the results, in which, for example, a situation originally written to induce an approach-approach conflict is now reinterpreted as having been an avoidance-avoidance conflict, because of unforeseen factors. Only a direct test of these interpretations would save the overall theory.

EXPERIMENT 5: REVISED CONFLICT SITUATIONS

Purpose

A final experiment was conducted to test the post hoc explanations of Experiment 4 and to seek firmer support for a conflict theory of disqualification in a bind. The first, major problem was that, in

TABLE 5
Frequencies of Choice in Revised Conflict Conditions (Experiment 5)

Situation		Message	Disqualification Scale Values[a] content	sender	receiver	context	sum	Condition[b] Report +/+	Report -/-	No Report +/+	No Report -/-
MEETING	A.	I think your hair looks great that way. / I don't think your hair looks good that way.	-.56	-.47	.03	-.61	-1.61	11	3	15	2
	B.	I think your dress is really nice. / I don't think your dress suits you.	-.53	-.47	-.94	-.36	-2.30	6	2	0	2
	C.	You've changed!	1.09	.92	.91	.97	3.89	3	15	5	16
								Quiz +/+	Quiz -/-	Application +/+	Application -/-
APPLICATION OR QUIZ	A.	You are exceptionally easy to get along with. / You are quite difficult to get along with.	-.30	-.72	-.48	-.55	-2.05	12	5	8	9
	B.	You are very intelligent. / You are not very intelligent.	-.52	-.40	-.50	-.60	-2.02	3	0	6	1
	C.	What do you think?	.82	1.11	1.09	1.14	4.16	5	15	6	10

[a] Scale values for positive and negative versions of the same message, and in both versions, were averaged here.

[b] Chi-square for A + B vs. C in the two different conflict conditions of each version: Report = 14.55, $df = 1$, $p < .0002$; No Report = 12.13, $df = 1$, $p < .0005$; Quiz = 10, $df = 1$, $p < .002$; Application = 1.67, $df = 1$, $p < .20$.

the job application situation, most subjects chose the disqualified response in both versions. If this were because the possible negative consequences of any advice in such a situation made both versions into avoidance-avoidance conflicts, then this perceived "risk" should be removed. Accordingly, the choice was embedded in a new context, similar in most respects, but with no practical consequences:

> *Quiz* (+/+): Someone you know quite well is filling out a "personality quiz" in a magazine. He is both bright and a really nice person—easy to get along with and intelligent as well.
>
> He asks you for your advice about filling out the "quiz." In particular, one of the questions is, "What is your most important good quality?" and he wonders what to say. You are interrupted by a phone call, so he says to leave him a note with what you think is his most important good quality.

The negative version was parallel, as before. The alternatives were the same as in Experiment 4, and the original, job application version from that experiment was also used, for comparison.

The other problem was the possible alternative explanations of the meeting situation, the "risk" and "reassurance" explanations described above. These were eliminated by two modifications: First, the other person simply comes to a staff meeting with a (good or bad) new dress and hair style; there is no report to be given, and none is mentioned. Second, the disqualified alternative is "You've changed!", which is evasive but not reassuring. Again, both the old and new versions were used; the only change in the old version was the new disqualified message.

Conflict theory predicts, first, that the disqualified reply will be chosen in the avoidance-avoidance condition of the personality quiz version, but not in the approach-approach condition of this situation, because the kinds of conflict are clearly different; there are no practical consequences to make direct replies negative or risky in the approach case. The job application version should replicate Experiment 4 (disqualification in both conditions). Second, the changes in the meeting situation should not change the results from those of Experiment 4; that is, both versions should support conflict theory and eliminate alternative explanations.

Method

Stimuli. Approach-approach and avoidance-avoidance conditions were presented in each of the four situations described above (meeting with report, meeting without report, personality quiz, and job application). The order of A and B was not varied but was always the opposite of their order in the text. Thus, there were eight unique stimuli, in the usual format, with a questionnaire attached.

Subjects and procedure. One hundred sixty summer-session students participated in their classes. Random assignment was made by permuting the sheets in blocks of eight; $n = 20$ per situation/condition.

Results and Discussion

All predictions were confirmed. The frequencies of choice, given in Table 5, show significant differences between approach-approach and avoidance-avoidance conditions in all except the job application version, as predicted. This also rules out other alternative explanations for the meeting situation. Thus, both conflict theory in general and the reinterpretation of Experiment 4 in particular are supported.

In an avoidance-avoidance conflict, subjects prefer the disqualified alternative; this alternative is not chosen in an approach-approach conflict unless practical consequences color such a conflict with negative consequences. Thus, disqualified messages are evoked by situations in which the subject apparently wants to avoid a more direct message. It is not the mere existence of choice or conflict, but a particular kind of choice and conflict, that gives rise to disqualified messages. Such messages are not sent when positive alternatives exist. They are sent when only negative alternatives exist, and the subject is thus able to reject such a choice and escape the bind by leaving the field communicationally.

SUMMARY

The series of experiments described here accomplish several of their aims. First, as suggested

in an earlier article (Bavelas & Smith, 1982) they validate our method of measuring disqualification by showing that these numbers vary as predicted, in accordance with the theory behind the construct (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955). The effect was found for over 30 different messages in five different situations (gift, class, employee, meeting, and application or quiz).

Second, they support a situational theory of disqualification and render less plausible any approaches based on error, individual differences, or pathology. Disqualifications are not a function of the communicator; they are a product of the interpersonal situation in which the communicator finds him/herself.

Third, the nature of such situations has been made somewhat more exact: They are not merely unpleasant situations, nor are they conflicts between positive alternatives; they are situations in which the communicator faces only messages with negative consequences and is offered "a way out" via a disqualified message. If clear content, sender, receiver, and context are visualized as the steps of a direct path, then disqualification is an indirect, circuitous route, but one that avoids the hazards that lie on the more direct path. It is a good solution to a difficult problem.

The latter point should be reemphasized. There is a tendency to see disqualification as "poor" communication and to label it (and the sender) pejoratively—as evasive, cowardly, dishonest, and so forth. However, the experimental situations used here were such that no message was the "good" or "correct" one; in all cases, the other choices were either unkind or dishonest. Only if we think situationally does the choice make sense; and if we do so, then attributions about the sender are irrelevant and meaningless. The disqualified message cannot be judged as undesirable unless another solution to an impossible situation is available.

Finally, these experiments tested the usefulness of a strictly experimental approach in interpersonal communication research. It seems that this approach can be productive in certain cases, where hypothesis testing is the main goal; that is, where the focus is not on examples of a particular communicational phenomenon but rather on the factors of which such a phenomenon is a function. Still, it would be useful and interesting to know how limited any generalization from such experiments might be, and we are beginning to answer these questions: Do such situations produce disqualified messages only when that choice is offered to the communicator? (No) Would normal communicators ever generate their own disqualified messages? (Yes) Are disqualifications limited to written communication (No), or do they, as many believe, use other communicational channels when those channels are available? (Yes) These questions are the focus of further experiments and articles, either completed or in progress, all aimed at extending the generalizability of the present results.

NOTES

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1. Adapted from Forrest (1980).
2. In this paper, "bind" is used in the general colloquial sense of being caught by the situation; this will be more precisely defined below. It does not refer to a "double bind" (Bateson et al., 1956).
3. I am indebted to Professor Tamara Dembo of Clark University for hastening this theoretical approach substantially.

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