

## Incrimination Through Innuendo: Can Media Questions Become Public Answers?

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Three experiments were conducted to examine the effects that incriminating innuendo delivered by media sources may have on audience impressions of innuendo targets. The first study demonstrated innuendo effects by showing that audience impressions of a target were swayed in a negative direction by exposure to a prototypical innuendo headline, the incriminating question (e.g., "Is P a criminal?"). A similar but substantially weaker effect was observed for an incriminating denial (e.g., "P is not a criminal"). The second study showed, somewhat unexpectedly, that although variations in source credibility affected the persuasiveness of direct incriminating assertions, they had appreciably less impact on the persuasiveness of innuendos. In the third study, the inferences an audience makes about the motives and knowledge of an innuendo source were investigated for their possible mediation of the innuendo effect. This analysis complemented the findings of the second study, in that audience inferences about the sensationalistic or muckraking qualities of the source were found to have a negligible influence on acceptance of innuendo from the source. The analysis also revealed, however, that audiences exposed to innuendo commonly infer that the source is attempting to avoid charges of libel, and that this inference can reduce audience receptiveness to innuendo communication.

The power of the press to change political events has been noted by many social commentators. In the recent political history of the United States, a particular form of this power has been highlighted by a series of remarkably similar incidents. Beginning with Watergate and continuing with Koreagate, the Bert Lance affair, and the like, it has been demonstrated that the media can influence the course of politics by conveying damaging information about people in the news. Of course, this possibility has been

recognized in some form for many years, and a broad matrix of libel legislation and judicial decision has arisen to protect the media's targets from undue incrimination (Phelps & Hamilton, 1978). However, this protective barrier seems permeable. When damaging personal information is disguised in hints, presuppositions, questions, qualifications, and other indirect but legal forms of reporting, its influence emerges nonetheless. The present research was designed to explore this innuendo effect in impression formation.

An innuendo about a person can be defined in terms of two critical features. The communications that media consumers typically identify as innuendos in the news and that have been classified as forms of indirect communication by psycholinguists (e.g., Clark & Haviland, 1977; Harris & Monaco, 1978) commonly consist of (a) a statement about a person and (b) a qualifier about the statement. Whereas the statement is a direct

assertion linking the person with some quality or activity, the qualifier is an expression reducing the likelihood that the statement is true. By these criteria, sentences such as "George may be a thief," "Lulu did not hold up the liquor store," and "Is Jane using drugs?" are all innuendos. Each can be analyzed into separate statement and qualifier components (i.e., "George is a thief; this may be true," "Lulu held up a liquor store; this is not true," "Jane is using drugs; it is not known whether this is true"). Statements and their qualifiers that are communicated separately, of course, would also be classified as innuendos. So, when a newspaper publishes a damaging story and qualifies it the next day, an innuendo can be said to have occurred. In any such instance, an innuendo effect would be obtained if the qualifier made little or no difference in the audience's acceptance of the statement.

The conclusion that innuendo effects should occur fairly regularly in media communication can be reached from three quite distinct lines of psychological reasoning. The first of these makes use of social cognitive research on the general topic of salience and is based on the idea that statements are more salient than qualifiers. In this view, statements might be expected to have greater impact than their accompanying qualifiers because they are more imageable (Carroll, 1978), more available in memory (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973), more susceptible to attempts at explanation (Ross, Lepper, & Hubbard, 1975) or memory elaboration (Loftus, 1979), more concrete (Nisbett, Borgida, Crandall, & Reed, 1976), and more likely to engender confirmatory hypothesis testing (Snyder & Cantor, 1979; Snyder & Swann, 1978). In other words, because statements are more salient than qualifiers, they could engage any number of cognitive processes in service of biasing the media consumer toward greater appreciation of the statement.

A second general explanation, one derived from the psycholinguistic study of presupposition, also indicates that innuendo effects might be widespread. This framework holds that communication is a cooperative enterprise and that for this reason, communication recipients typically expect that a source

will not presuppose irrelevant, nonsensical, or implausible information (Clark & Haviland, 1977; Harris & Monaco, 1978). Now, in many communications of innuendo, the syntactic arrangement of the statement and qualifier is such that the statement is presupposed or "given," and the qualifier is asserted as an informative or "new" fact. "Ginger did not steal the radio," for example, presupposes that someone (perhaps Ginger) stole the radio and asserts as new that Ginger was not the one. When recipients are exposed to an innuendo, then, the inferences they draw about the innuendo target are likely to reflect the assumption that the statement portion of the innuendo is relevant, sensible, and plausible. After all, a source would not go to the trouble of making a qualifying assertion about a presupposed statement that is wholly ridiculous; why should one deny, for instance, that a person walked through a shopping mall wearing a chicken suit unless this was in fact a possibility? Innuendo effects, in this light, may commonly derive from the tendency of recipients to accept a statement merely because the statement and qualifier were communicated.

These general explanations can be supplemented by a third, more specific interpretation of innuendo that draws on the potential importance of the communication context. Because the innuendo effects of interest here usually occur in the context of media communication about public figures, it seems fair to suggest that an audience's knowledge of the workings of this context might play an important part in their interpretation of innuendo. It is generally known, for instance, that reporters are motivated to provide accounts of criminal activity for multiple reasons. If an audience interprets an innuendo as an expression of the reporter's motive to uncover the truth, it could be highly susceptible to innuendo effects. If it sees the innuendo as a sign of sensationalism or a motive to make news, it could be wholly uninfluenced by the innuendo. Similar contextual inferences could be made about the qualification. A qualifier seen as an act of benevolence on the part of the reporter, for example, should lead to greater innuendo effects than one seen as an act of

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self-protection against charges of libel. This contextual interpretation of innuendo, therefore, allows for the frequent occurrence of innuendo effects under some audience interpretations of media reporting and the suppression of such effects under others.

Taken together, the explanations based on salience, presupposition, and context suggest that innuendo effects should materialize quite often in media-based impression formation. It was for the purpose of testing this proposition that the present studies were designed. Experiment 1 served as an initial exploration of innuendo effects based on newspaper headlines; impressions based on directly incriminating statements and neutral comparison statements were contrasted with impressions based on two prototypical forms of innuendo, the incriminating question and the incriminating denial. Experiments 2 and 3 were aimed more specifically at elaborating the context explanation of innuendo effects. In Experiment 2, a test of the effects of source credibility on the influence of innuendo was undertaken, and in Experiment 3, an examination of the particular contextual inferences that facilitate and inhibit innuendo effect production was made.

### Experiment 1

The experimental arrangements of this study were designed with two criteria in mind. First, for the purpose of providing a realistic laboratory analogue of the setting within which media innuendo is encountered, subjects were presented with a series of headlines ostensibly obtained from newspaper coverage of an election. Second, as a means of establishing conditions optimal for the observation of innuendo effects, quite highly incriminating innuendos were presented about target persons—candidates in the election—with whom subjects would be otherwise unacquainted.

### Method

**Overview and design.** Subjects were each exposed to a set of four headlines about political candidates and then were asked to indicate their impressions of each candidate on a series of evaluative rating scales. A  $4 \times 4$  design with repeated measures on the second factor was used to assess the effects of headline counterbalancing (four groups of subjects each received a different counterbalanced set of headline contents) and

headline form (assertion, question, denial, and neutral control) on impression negativity.

**Procedure.** Forty-eight undergraduates (24 females and 24 males) at Trinity University volunteered to participate in the experiment in exchange for extra credit in their introductory psychology classes. Assembled in small groups, the subjects were given booklets that asked them to consider six headlines about (fictitious) city council candidates; each of these had ostensibly appeared in the (fictitious) *Seattle Tribune* several weeks before a recent election. Two of the headlines were fillers designed to disguise the nature of the manipulation (e.g., "Dennis Sikorsky Gathers Union Support"), and the remaining four were constructed in four different forms arranged to test for innuendo effects. One headline appeared as a direct incriminating assertion (e.g., "Bob Talbert Linked With Mafia"), another took the form of a question (e.g., "Is Karen Downing Associated With Fraudulent Charity?"), a third was phrased as a denial (e.g., "Andrew Winters Not Connected To Bank Embezzlement"), and the fourth headline was a neutral assertion intended to serve as a control (e.g., "George Armstrong Arrives In City"). The headlines were systematically counterbalanced across subjects so that a particular headline appeared in the four different forms (e.g., "Bob Talbert Linked With Mafia," "Is Bob Talbert Linked With Mafia?" "Bob Talbert Not Linked With Mafia," and "Bob Talbert Celebrates Birthday"), one for each of four groups of 12 subjects.

When subjects had finished considering the headlines, they were given written instructions on the use of rating scales and were asked not to look at the headlines further. They were then instructed to report their impressions of each of the candidates on a series of 7-point bipolar adjective scales. The scales had been selected to reflect most strongly the evaluative dimension of judgment: good—bad, kind—cruel, sociable—unsociable, intelligent—unintelligent, valuable—worthless, honest—dishonest, beautiful—ugly, pleasant—unpleasant, rational—irrational, and fresh—stale. The mean rating across scales of candidates presented in each of the four forms of headlines, an index that could vary from a positive (1) to a negative (7) evaluation, served as the dependent measure.

### Results and Discussion

Initial analyses of the internal consistency of the impression index for each of the four headline forms revealed values of coefficient alpha sufficient to justify the use of mean ratings as a summary index of evaluation (.86, .82, .83, and .80 for assertion, question, denial, and control forms, respectively).

A  $4 \times 4$  analysis of variance (ANOVA) with repeated measures on the second factor was used to assess the effects of headline counterbalancing and headline form on subjects' impressions of the candidate named in the headline. No significant effects were associated with the counterbalanced groups factor. A significant main effect for headline

form,  $F(3, 132) = 3.45, p < .02$ , was analyzed by means of the Newman-Keuls procedure. This test revealed that the headline formed as an incriminating assertion ( $M = 4.25$ ), as would be expected, produced evaluations significantly more negative than those produced by the control headline ( $M = 3.00; p < .05$ ). More striking, however, is the finding that questions ( $M = 4.33$ ) yielded a level of negativity essentially equal to that of assertions and also significantly greater than that of the control ( $p < .05$ ). Denial headlines ( $M = 3.73$ ), in turn, resulted in a level of negativity that did not differ significantly from the control, but which was also not significantly lower than the level produced by the incriminating assertion.

These findings offer a clear laboratory illustration of the innuendo effect. Just as mere indictment is sometimes sufficient to lead a jury to regard a defendant as guilty (Weid & Roff, 1938), it appears that simple questioning of a candidate's connection with untoward activities can have damaging effects on the candidate's public image. Given the intermediate position of impressions based on denials of criminal activity in these results, it also seems possible that in certain extreme cases, the denial of criminality might itself prove incriminating. Under the conditions of this experiment, then, and perhaps in some appreciable proportion of natural media communications, the recipients of innuendo seem apt to go far beyond the information given.

### Experiment 2

The results of Experiment 1 should be taken as evidence that innuendo effects can occur under certain, perhaps optimal circumstances. It would seem that under the usual conditions of public exposure to media reports, however, there could exist a variety of limits to the impact of innuendo. Prior knowledge of the virtue of the innuendo target, for example, might diminish the persuasiveness of certain innuendos, and the utter implausibility of the innuendo statement itself could reduce the influence of others. A limiting factor that cuts across these specific features of the innuendo and target, however, and which therefore might have the

most general moderating influence in natural settings, is the credibility of the innuendo source.

The context interpretation of innuendo effects offered earlier in this report provides a useful framework for representing the potential impact of source credibility. Recall that in this view, audiences may accept innuendo primarily because they understand that media reporters must qualify their portrayals of incomplete evidence. Audiences may reject innuendo, by the same token, when they recognize that media reporters are often motivated to convey sensational, incriminating, and hence audience-attracting reports that are qualified only to avoid libel charges. If media consumers do appreciate the context of innuendo in this way, it can be expected that innuendo effects would be prevalent in response to innuendo delivered by a highly credible news source and would be substantially attenuated in response to innuendo emanating from a less credible source. This experiment assessed this possibility.

### Method

**Overview and design.** The experiment used an extension of the arrangements of Experiment 1 to include a grouping factor of high versus low source credibility. A  $2 \times 4 \times 4$  design with repeated measures on the third factor was used to gauge the effects of high versus low source credibility (ascription of headlines to the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* vs. the *National Enquirer* or the *Midnight Globe*), headline counterbalancing and headline form on the index of impression negativity.

**Procedure.** Forty-eight undergraduates (24 females and 24 males) were recruited to serve as subjects under the same auspices as those in the previous study and were assembled in small groups and given booklets with instructions on the first page. The instructions and task were the same as those for Experiment 1, differing only in three aspects. First, the subject was instructed that the headlines he or she would read referred to past candidates of the U.S. House of Representatives and had appeared in a national newspaper. Second, the source credibility variation was included as a between-subjects variable; for two groups of 12 subjects each, the headlines were attributed to a highly credible source (the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*), whereas for two other groups of 12 subjects each, the headlines were attributed to a less credible source (the *National Enquirer* or the *Midnight Globe*). Third, a set of ratings was collected from all subjects after completion of the initial impression task for the purpose of checking the manipulation of source credibility; each subject was asked to rate the four newspapers individually on a 7-point scale from "believable" (7) to "not believable"

(1). The other features of the experiment conformed to those of Experiment 1. Subjects responded to the candidates named in each of six headlines (two fillers, assertion, question, denial, and control) by rating each candidate on ten 7-point evaluative scales.

### Results and Discussion

#### Credibility manipulation effectiveness.

An initial  $4 \times 4 \times 4$  ANOVA with repeated measures on the third factor was conducted to assess the impact of counterbalanced group, newspaper group, and newspaper rated on subjects' judgments of newspaper believability. The only significant effect associated with this analysis was for newspaper rated,  $F(3, 96) = 98.32, p < .001$ . A subsequent Newman-Keuls analysis of this effect revealed that whereas the mean believability of the two newspapers initially designated as high in source credibility, the *New York Times* ( $M = 5.85$ ) and the *Washington Post* ( $M = 5.91$ ), did not differ, and the mean believability of the newspapers designated as low in source credibility, the *National Enquirer* ( $M = 2.52$ ) and the *Midnight Globe* ( $M = 2.64$ ), also did not differ, all pairwise comparisons of high and low credibility newspapers showed significant differences ( $p < .01$  in each case). These findings indicate that source credibility was successfully manipulated, and the absence of other significant effects in the overall analysis suggests as well that the relative credibility of the four sources was perceived similarly by members of the various treatment groups.

**Impression index.** As in Experiment 1, a reliability analysis of the impression index indicated a satisfactory level of internal consistency (mean coefficient alpha = .83). The summed ratings served as the dependent measure, then, in the principal analysis, a 2 (high vs. low source credibility newspaper)  $\times$  4 (counterbalanced groups)  $\times$  4 (headline form) ANOVA with repeated measures on the third factor. Mean impressions of the candidates, averaged across the counterbalanced groups factor, are presented in Table 1. As could be anticipated on the basis of Experiment 1, the analysis indicated a significant main effect for headline form,  $F(3, 120) = 47.27, p < .001$ . Newman-Keuls analysis of this effect showed that impressions formed from assertions ( $M = 4.38$ ), questions ( $M = 4.12$ ), and denials ( $M =$

Table 1  
*Mean Impression Negativity as a Function of Source Credibility and Headline Form*

Source credibility	Headline form			
	Assertion	Question	Denial	Control
High	4.65	4.28	3.54	2.84
Low	4.12	3.97	3.56	3.12

Note. Possible range was 1 to 7, with higher values for greater negativity.

3.55) were each significantly more negative than those based on the control ( $M = 2.98; p < .01$  in each case). Viewed solely in terms of this analysis of the main effect, the results of this study provide a complete replication of Experiment 1, with one exception. The denial-control comparison in this study was significant. For whatever reasons of sampling variation or variation in procedure, the results of this investigation suggest that denying a person's criminal actions can be more damaging than avoiding the issue entirely.

The influence of source credibility on innuendo effects was evidenced in a significant interaction of headline form and source credibility,  $F(3, 120) = 3.89, p < .02$ . A partition of this interaction by simple main effects analysis disclosed a significant simple effect for source credibility within the assertion headline condition,  $F(1, 46) = 6.67, p < .05$ .<sup>1</sup> As shown in Table 1, high credibility sources created greater negativity toward the targets of their directly incriminating assertions than did low credibility sources. This finding is consistent with the tradition of source credibility research which generally indicates that highly credible sources are more persuasive than less credible sources in the delivery of direct influence (e.g., Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953). However, the simple effects analysis evinced no other significant comparisons between high and low credibility headlines ( $p > .10$  in each case). The impact of question innuendos, then, was not reliably reduced by their association with sources of low credibility, and the influence of denial innuendos remained undiminished

<sup>1</sup> Degrees of freedom were determined by the Satterthwaite approximation.

by low source credibility as well. Viewed in this way, this interaction indicates that source credibility has a negligible impact on innuendo effects even though it plays an important part in the persuasiveness of direct assertions.

The interaction can also be considered, however, in terms of the simple main effects of headline form for each level of source credibility. Partitioned this way, significant simple effects of headline form are found for both high credibility,  $F(3, 120) = 39.07, p < .001$ , and low credibility,  $F(3, 120) = 12.09, p < .001$ . Subsequent individual comparisons for the high credibility headlines (Tukey procedure) indicated that both the question and denial headlines yielded impressions significantly more negative than the control ( $p < .01$  for each). So, reliable innuendo effects were clearly evident for the high credibility sources. For sources of low credibility, however, innuendo seemed somewhat less powerful. Whereas the question headline resulted in significantly more negativity than the control ( $p < .01$ ), the denial headline did not produce significantly greater incrimination than the control. To a certain extent, then, this way of viewing the interaction, like the comparison of high and low credibility groups on each headline, suggests that source credibility has only a weak impact on the persuasive appeal of innuendos. But since this conclusion was substantiated here only for the case of denial innuendo, and still at the expense of accepting the null hypothesis, it must be viewed with circumspection.

These findings, even in light of a conservative interpretation, seem to represent an anomaly for the context interpretation of innuendo effects. Although it would seem reasonable that audiences might recognize the sensationalistic motives of many sources low in credibility and so discount innuendos that such sources convey, the present results suggest that source credibility makes only a small difference in the power of innuendo communication. One way of explaining this observation is to suggest that although audiences do understand the context of media innuendo and do react differentially to innuendos on the basis of some contextual factors, the particular contextual inferences they may make about source credibility, sen-

sationalism, and the like have little influence on innuendo acceptance. What is needed, then, is a more fine-grained analysis of the contextual inferences that audiences make in response to innuendo. This was the task of the final study.

### Experiment 3

What kinds of inferences might an audience make about the innuendo context that would affect their reaction to innuendo communication? To begin with, it seems necessary to consider two general types of inferences—those relevant to the statement portion of the innuendo and those relevant to the qualification. In deciding why a particular innuendo was delivered, a recipient could well perceive that the statement was offered for one reason, whereas the qualification was offered for another. A further partition of contextual inferences can then be made in terms of source motivation versus source knowledge. In thinking about an innuendo statement, for instance, a recipient might infer that it was made with a certain intent (e.g., to damage the target, to make news, etc.) or with a certain body of knowledge (e.g., damning evidence about the target). Similarly, in considering the innuendo qualification, the recipient could infer that it appeared by virtue of particular source intent (e.g., to avoid libel charges) or particular source knowledge (e.g., exonerating evidence about the target).

With this four-fold partition of contextual inferences in mind, we conducted a series of pilot investigations for the purpose of assembling a set of such inferences that would be most relevant to the interpretation of incriminating media innuendo. First, we asked friends, colleagues, and subjects to consider an innuendo headline and to suggest what the source might have known or might have been trying to accomplish both in communicating the statement and in qualifying it. Then we asked a group of subjects ( $n = 80$ ) to rate the extent to which they would agree with each of a set of inferences in the case of a particular innuendo. Additions and deletions to this set were made following a factor analysis of these ratings, and a final set of contextual inferences for use in this experiment was the result. The experiment was

arranged, then, to investigate the potential mediating role of these inferences in the occurrence of innuendo effects.

### Method

**Overview and design.** Subjects in this experiment were exposed either to an innuendo (an incriminating question) or to an incriminating assertion and were asked to report their impressions of the target as in the earlier experiments. Four different headline contents were used across subjects, so the design was a 2 (question vs. assertion)  $\times$  4 (headline content) factorial for this part of the study. Subjects were also given the opportunity following their impression reports, however, to express their belief in each of 21 contextual inferences identified in pilot research (e.g., "The reporter has other information that contradicts the headline," "The reporter is trying to sell newspapers," etc.). The inference ratings were factor analyzed, and inference factors were then used in discriminant and multiple regression analyses to predict exposure to innuendo and impression negativity, respectively. In this way, it was expected that the connection between innuendo exposure and impression negativity, by way of contextual inference, might be ascertained.

**Procedure** Eighty-six undergraduates (46 females and 40 males) from Trinity University volunteered to participate as subjects. Each received a booklet containing a cover story similar to that used in Experiment 1 (i.e., the city council election covered by the *Seattle Tribune*) and a single headline. For half of the subjects, this headline was one of the four incriminating questions used in Experiment 1 (e.g., "Is Karen Downing Associated With Fraudulent Charity?"), whereas for the other half, this headline was one of the four incriminating assertion counterparts of these (e.g., "Karen Downing Associated With Fraudulent Charity"). Subjects reported their impressions of the headline target on the same scales used in the prior experiments and then turned to the contextual inference rating task. For this task, subjects were instructed that they would be considering a series of statements about the reporter who wrote the headline, each of which made some suggestion about what the reporter was thinking or doing at the time. Subjects were asked to indicate their belief in each statement by rating it from "strongly agree" (7) to "strongly disagree" (1). Following this, subjects were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

### Results and Discussion

Since the impression index again proved reliable (coefficient alpha of .87), an initial 2 (question vs. assertion headline)  $\times$  4 (headline content) factorial unweighted means ANOVA was conducted on the index. This analysis, as might be expected on the basis of the previous studies, revealed no significant difference between the negativity of impressions based on questions ( $M = 4.00$ ) and assertions ( $M = 4.32$ ),  $F(1, 78) = 2.89$ ,  $p > .05$ . This lack of significant differentiation between innuendo and direct commu-

nication was the focal point for the subsequent analyses. First, a factor analysis of the contextual inference items was conducted to identify the major dimensions of inference. Second, an examination of the connection between exposure to innuendo and contextual inference was made by a discriminant analysis with innuendo versus assertion as the grouping variable and inference factors as predictors. Third, an assessment of the impact of inferences on impressions of the innuendo target was made by means of a multiple linear regression of inference factors on impression negativity.

**Contextual inference factor analysis.** The matrix of intercorrelations among ratings of the 21 inference items was factor analyzed (principal component method with communalities in the diagonal, varimax rotation) to a five-factor solution that accounted for 56.6% of the unrotated variance. The factors were clearly interpretable using a factor loading criterion of .50. In the following list, the number of items loaded on a factor by this criterion is noted in parentheses, and a sample pair of high-loading items is given to illustrate the nature of each factor.

1. Sensationalism (5): The reporter is engaging in sensationalism; the reporter is trying to sell newspapers.
  2. Retaliation concern (4): The reporter is afraid of being charged with libel; the reporter is afraid of (the target's) retaliation for the story.
  3. Incriminating evidence (3): The reporter didn't want to reveal all the damaging evidence he had about (the target); the reporter knows more incriminating information about (the target) than he is saying.
  4. Exonerating evidence (2): The reporter has other information that contradicts the headline; the reporter has other evidence that clears (the target) of the charge.
  5. Public knowledge (2): The reporter thinks that (the target's) improper activities are already widely known; the reporter believes that most people are aware of (the target's) questionable behavior.
- Of the 21 items, 5 were not above the criterion loading on any factor; all but one, however, loaded above .30 on a least one factor, indicating that this factor structure ac-

counted quite well for the overall set of inferences.

**Innuendo and inference.** A discriminant analysis of innuendo versus assertion with inference factor scores as predictors was performed by the stepwise method using the smallest Wilks's lambda criterion for entry of predictors with univariate  $F$ s greater than one. A significant discriminant function was found,  $\chi^2(2) = 15.33$ ,  $p < .0005$ , with standardized discriminant function coefficients of .95 for Factor 2 (retaliation concern) and .35 for Factor 1 (sensationalism). Univariate ANOVAs for each factor showed a significant influence of innuendo on Factor 2,  $F(1, 84) = 14.97$ ,  $p < .0002$ , but a nonsignificant effect of innuendo on Factor 1,  $F(1, 84) = 1.74$ ,  $p < .10$ . These findings indicate that the audience exposed to an innuendo, in contrast to one given an assertion, is more likely to infer that the source is concerned about possible retaliation for libelous or incriminating reporting. The audience to an innuendo is also slightly more likely to infer that the source is engaging in sensationalism, but not significantly so. Of the inferences an audience could make to distinguish innuendo from assertion, it seems that the primary inference is that the reporter is being self-protective. Little seems to be inferred about the reporter's knowledge of incriminating or exonerating evidence or about the reporter's knowledge of prior public awareness.

**Inference and impressions.** How do the contextual inferences affect the audience's impressions of the innuendo target? As a group, they had a significant impact; a stepwise multiple linear regression of the five factors on impression negativity showed a significant multiple correlation of .57,  $F(5, 80) = 7.82$ ,  $p < .001$ .<sup>2</sup> The strongest individual predictor of impression negativity was Factor 4 (exonerating evidence), with a beta of  $-.44$ ,  $F(1, 80) = 23.11$ ,  $p < .001$ ; when the audience infers that the reporter is withholding some positive information about the target, their negativity toward the target is significantly reduced. Next strongest in predicting impression was Factor 3 (incriminating evidence), with a beta of .27,  $F(1, 80) = 8.52$ ,  $p < .01$ ; when the audience infers that the source is privy to some additional incriminating evidence about the target,

their negativity toward the target is significantly increased. The third strongest (and only other significant) predictor of impression was Factor 2 (retaliation concern), with a beta of  $-.19$ ,  $F(1, 80) = 4.28$ ,  $p < .05$ ; inferring that the source fears retaliation for libelous reporting leads the audience to become less negative toward the target. In sum, impressions based on incriminating headlines are made less negative when the audience believes that the reporter is concealing evidence that would clear the target or when the audience infers that the reporter is attempting to avoid libel charges. Impressions become more negative, in turn, when the audience infers that the reporter knows more incriminating information about the target.

**Contextual inference and the innuendo effect.** The initial impetus for this study was the idea that contextual inferences might mediate the relationship between innuendo and impressions of the innuendo target. In light of the present analyses, the nature of this mediation becomes clear. The only contextual inference factor identified both as a significant concomitant of innuendo exposure and as a significant predictor of impression negativity was Factor 2, retaliation concern. Although innuendo had some impact on another factor, and impressions were influenced by yet others, the common factor linking these variables was the inference that a source was concerned about retaliation or libel charges. So, when an innuendo is delivered by a media source, the audience is inclined to infer that the source is being self-protective by conveying incriminating information in an indirect (and presumably legal) way. It is this inference, then, that may lessen the audience's acceptance of the incriminating statement portion of the innuendo. Realizing that innuendo qualifications are made to escape retaliation or litigation, the audience also recognizes that the negative information communicated by innuendo may not be true.

These contextual inference findings also

<sup>2</sup> Separate regressions conducted for the innuendo and assertion groups revealed similar effects; however, the pattern of findings reported here for both groups was more strongly paralleled by the pattern for the innuendo group alone than by that of the assertion group alone.

lend a certain clarity to the results of Experiment 2. Since inferences concerning the sensationalistic motives of the source were found to have a negligible impact on audience impressions of the target, it appears that the minimal influence of source credibility on innuendo effects observed in Experiment 2 may be the rule rather than the exception. To be sure, the present findings indicate that even the use of innuendo itself may lead (somewhat weakly) to the inference that the source is being sensational. But this inference, whether derived from such observation of reporting tactics or from direct source credibility information like that given in Experiment 2, apparently plays only a minor role in lessening the damaging force of innuendo effects.

If the results of this study can be generalized to the settings of everyday media communication, some recommendations for specific strategies to cushion the effects of innuendo become available. First, it can be argued that any attempts to derogate the source, to direct the audience's attention to the source's sensationalistic motives, or to fight innuendo by charges of muckraking, yellow journalism, or the like may be largely ineffective. Second, it can be suggested that a more useful tactic would be to point out the self-protective nature of the innuendo communication. If the audience can be sensitized to the observation that media reporters use innuendo to avoid retaliation for potentially libelous charges, the present findings suggest that they may become less receptive to innuendo effects. Finally, it can be noted that some avenues of defense against innuendo through countercharge might prove useful. Because both innuendo and assertion effects depend on audience inferences about source knowledge, it could be that questioning the source's familiarity with incriminating evidence or suggesting that the source has concealed evidence that would vindicate the target might serve to dampen the innuendo effect.

#### General Discussion

To a certain extent, the results of the present studies indicate that the succession of beleaguered public figures over the years who have ascribed their ruin to media in-

nuendo were right. In these experiments, subjects who served as audiences to incriminating innuendo regularly became as negative to the innuendo target as did those who were exposed to directly incriminating accusations. The second study demonstrated that this effect was only minimally reduced even when the media sources were clearly of the disreputable sort that might well be offering innuendo just for its sensational impact. The third study, in turn, showed that any reductions in the effectiveness of incriminating communication that accrue from its delivery through innuendo are due to audience inferences that the source of innuendo is attempting to avoid charges of libel. Because these findings signal the beginnings of some strategies whereby the power of media innuendo might be moderated, they may have some practical significance—more, certainly, than the suggestion entertained by a Watergate-era innuendo target that the press simply be abolished.

#### Generality of Innuendo Effects

The social psychological significance of these studies hinges not as much on their applied aspects as on their potential generality. Given the effectiveness of innuendo in conveying damaging person knowledge in the context of media communication, it becomes important to know if innuendo might similarly convey any kind of information in any setting. Although the present results cannot serve as the basis for such a generalization, some data do exist that are relevant.

A study by Wegner, Kerker, and Beattie (Note 1), for example, suggests that innuendo effects can surface in a communication context somewhat divorced from the one studied here—the letter of recommendation. Subjects in this experiment were shown a packet of application materials ostensibly submitted to the university on behalf of a candidate for admission to the graduate program in psychology. Single innuendo sentences inserted in one recommendation letter (e.g., "Sally did not steal a tape recorder from the lab") were sufficient in this context to make subjects judge the applicant as unacceptable. To the extent that a communication context shares certain features with

the media context represented in the present experiments (e.g., the highly charged atmosphere of evaluation, the lack of prior audience knowledge of the target, etc.), it seems likely that innuendo effects will be found. The specification of the proper dimensions along which the generalization of this effect across settings may be observed, however, awaits future research.

Some evidence is also available about the generality of the innuendo effect across different kinds of person information. In research conducted by Beattie and Wegner (Note 2), subjects were presented with denials of both negative statements about persons and positive statements about persons. Some of these denials conveyed the impression that would be expected on logical grounds, one opposite in evaluative tone from the undenied information. But other denials, particularly those in which concrete behavioral descriptions were given (e.g., "B. T. did not hold up a liquor store," "M. C. did not give \$400 to charity"), yielded innuendo effects. In these cases, and independent of the initial positivity or negativity of the statement portion of the innuendo, qualifications that wholly denied the statement were ineffectual in reversing the evaluative tone that was conveyed. These findings show that innuendo effects may generalize to positive person information under certain conditions and point to the possibility that concreteness of the innuendo statement may prove crucial as a dimension of generalization as well.

#### Explanation of Innuendo Effects

Of the three explanations that were proposed for innuendo effects at the outset of this report, it was the contextual inference interpretation that received the most emphasis in the ensuing research. This emphasis arose not from any inherent shortcomings in the salience or presupposition explanations of innuendo effects, but rather from the especially rich and intuitively appealing assortment of possible mediators of persuasive communication that become available on thinking about the problem of innuendo in terms of contextual inference. Quite simply, the idea that an audience perceives not only a communication but also the com-

municator and the context is a useful one. When the array of contextual inferences that may arise in a particular communication episode is identified, the persuasive impact of the communication under a variety of different configurations of the particular context can be ascertained.

Several previous studies of innuendo-like effects exist that might be profitably reexamined from the contextual inference perspective. In research by Yandell (1979), for example, subjects judged a person who denied wrongdoing before he was accused of it to be as guilty as a person who confessed to wrongdoing directly. This appears to be an innuendo effect. It was also found in this study, however, that a person who denied wrongdoing after being accused was not seen as very guilty at all. The innuendo effect disappeared under these conditions. Although Yandell offered a version of the presupposition explanation for the occurrence of the innuendo effect, this explanation does not extend in an obvious way to the effect's nonoccurrence; why should the effect vanish when the audience merely knows the presupposed incriminating evidence in advance? The contextual inference framework offers several possible interpretations of this difference, however, one of which Yandell tested. He found that subjects who heard the denial before the accusation were more likely to attribute defensiveness to the person making the denial. A more complete analysis of contextual inferences might have determined whether this particular inference was more or less important in producing innuendo effects than inferences regarding other source motives (e.g., the person was trying to avoid being accused) or source knowledge (e.g., the person knew about the wrongdoing, the person knew an accusation was forthcoming, etc.).

Another innuendo-like effect, this one observed by Ross, Lepper, and Hubbard (1975), was initially interpreted in terms of a salience argument. These researchers found that impressions of performance tended to persevere despite debriefing information indicating that the performance feedback had been false. The effect was explained in terms of memory elaboration resulting from subjects' attempts to understand the performance feedback. However, in an extension

of this investigation, Hatvany and Strack (in press) observed an unexpected reversal of this effect in a different setting. In their study, subjects were exposed to court proceedings in which a key witness revealed that her incriminating accusation of the defendant was entirely a fabrication; the subjects reacted more positively to the defendant under these conditions than when no key witness testimony was heard at all. This reversal can be interpreted in the salience framework when it is recognized that the courtroom denial itself may have been highly salient and so more influential than the incriminating accusation. But it is also interesting to note that contextual inferences may have been widely disparate in the debriefing and courtroom paradigms. Subjects in the debriefing studies may have fallen prey to innuendo effects by interpreting the experimenter's attempts to debrief them as lies; subjects in the courtroom study, in turn, may have avoided innuendo effects by interpreting the key witness's retraction as a gesture of genuineness.

The proper framework within which the innuendo effect may be interpreted, in sum, is still very much an open matter. Although the presupposition argument seems promising for cases in which the innuendo statement is not known to the audience prior to innuendo exposure, its contribution is unclear in other cases. The salience argument offers a unique simplicity that also holds appeal. The contextual inference framework, as set forth here, suggests a complex array of natural mediators of the innuendo effect and so aids in making sense of the audience's decision procedures in each innuendo context. It remains for future research to determine whether one or a combination of these explanations is most useful in generating additional understanding of innuendo effects.

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## Membership Group, Reference Group, and the Attribution of Attitudes to Groups

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This article analyzes the attribution of attitudes to groups based on the 1976 national survey of United States adults by the University of Michigan's Center for Political Studies. The analysis attempted to integrate Heider's P-O-X model and concepts of unit and sentiment relations, Sherif and Hovland's concepts of assimilation and contrast effects, and the distinction between reference and membership groups. It was hypothesized that assimilation would be more likely when attributing attitudes to a group with which one has both membership (unit) and positive reference (sentiment) group ties. In attributions to racial groups, membership group had a significant effect, but the influence of reference group was negligible. When an age grouping was the stimulus, both membership and reference group exerted the predicted effects. The asymmetry reported previously in attribution of policy positions to individual politicians also was observed here with a virtual absence of negative correlations between own and attributed position even when the group being estimated was neither a membership nor a positive reference group.

This article examines the attitude attributions made by blacks and whites in the United States in 1976 to their own and to the other racial grouping. In doing this, the concepts of reference and membership group are linked with the sentiment and unit relations in Heider's balance theory and with the concepts of assimilation and contrast

from Sherif and Hovland's social judgment theory. The same type of analysis is then reported using age as the criterion for defining membership and reference group.

In human relations, attitude attribution is involved in the dual processes of impression formation and impression management. The essence of these processes may be quite similar in a variety of social relationships other than personal friendships (Goffman, 1959), for example, professional-client or salesperson-customer. In such relationships, behavior is probably not independent of the attribution process. In a courting situation, one would probably be reluctant to propose marriage unless one, accurately or not, attributed favorable sentiments to the other person and anticipated a positive response. Viewed in this way, there may be many similarities between a two-person interpersonal situation and the situation in which a person attributes attitudes to, or estimates the climate of opinion in, a group. McCauley, Stitt, and Segal (1980) pointed out that group stereotypes are attributions and can be studied

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