Creating shared reality about ambiguous sexual harassment: The role of stimulus ambiguity in audience-tuning effects on memory

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A B S T R A C T

By tuning messages about ambiguous information to their audience’s attitude, communicators can reduce uncertainty and form audience-congruent memories. This effect has been conceptualized as the creation of shared reality with the audience. We applied this approach to representations of ambiguous antecedents of sexual harassment and examined whether the effect depends on the event’s perceived ambiguity. Participants read a testimony about a supervisor’s ambiguous behaviors toward a female employee and described the behaviors to an audience who had previously evaluated him positively or negatively. We manipulated perceived ambiguity of the testimony by including or omitting information about eventual, clear-cut harassment (known vs. unknown outcome). As predicted, participants aligned their messages and memory with their audience’s evaluation only in the unknown-outcome condition, where epistemic uncertainty was higher. The findings highlight the role of epistemic needs in the communicative creation of a shared reality about a ubiquitous social situation with potentially harmful outcomes.

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1. Introduction

Social events, particularly people’s behaviors, often allow different interpretations and are hence ambiguous. There are various ways in which perceivers can reduce such ambiguity and the concomitant uncertainty. A channel that has received little, but increasing attention is interpersonal communication (e.g., Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Echterhoff, Higgins, & Levine, 2009; Higgins, 1992). One way in which interpersonal communication allows communicators to reduce uncertainty is audience tuning (Higgins, 1992). Audience tuning occurs when communicators adapt their message to the audience’s perspective or attitude regarding an event (e.g., Clark & Murphy, 1982; Higgins, 1992). Audience tuning not only affects message formulation, but can also have consequences for communicators’ subsequent cognition, including memory for the originally encoded events or behaviors (McCann & Higgins, 1992; for related accounts, see Chiu, Krauss, & Lau, 1998; Marsh, 2007).

For example, after communicators have tuned a message about a target person’s ambiguous behaviors to an audience’s (positive or negative) attitude toward the target, they often end up with memories of the target that are consistent with their audience-tuned message (Echterhoff, Higgins, & Groll, 2005; Higgins & Rhodes, 1978). To illustrate, an audience-tuning effect on memory occurs when a team member describes a newcomer’s ambiguous behavior more positively to a team colleague who likes the newcomer, and later remembers the newcomer’s initial behaviors more positively, consistent with the audience-tuned message.

This audience-tuning effect on memory has been investigated within the saying–is-believing paradigm, where participants are given ambivalent behavioral information about a target person (Higgins & Rhodes, 1978). They are asked to describe the target person to an audience who has already formed an impression about the target. Those who communicate with an audience who likes (vs. dislikes) the target person describe the target more positively. As a result, the valence of communicators’ memory of the original target material, assessed with a surprise free-recall task, matches the valence of their audience-tuned messages (for a review, see

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Echterhoff, Higgins, et al., 2009). Hence, both the communicators’ message and their memory are aligned with the audience’s attitude. The effect can be regarded as communication-driven because it depends on the production of an audience-congruent message; the effect is not found when communicators, who know the audience’s attitude, do not actually produce a message (Higgins & Rheols, 1978; Higgins, Echterhoff, Cresplio, & Kopietz, 2007). Also, the effect of the audience’s attitude on recall valence is often statistically mediated by message valence (McCann & Higgins, 1992). Thus, the effect is a case of conversational influence on communicators’ own memory (Hirst & Echterhoff, 2012).

This audience-tuning effect on communicators’ memory has been conceptualized as the creation of shared reality (Echterhoff, Higgins, et al., 2009; Hardin & Higgins, 1996). Shared reality is defined as the product of the motivated process of experiencing a commonality of inner states about the world (Echterhoff, Higgins, et al., 2009). According to shared-reality theory, the audience-tuning effect occurs to the extent that communicators are motivated to create a shared reality with their audience and succeed at creating that shared reality. The motivation for creating this commonality can be relational (Echterhoff, Lang, Krämer, & Higgins, 2009; Pierucci, Klein, & Carnaghi, 2013) and, more critical to our current analysis, epistemic. Epistemic motivation reflects the need to achieve a valid and reliable understanding of the world (Hardin & Higgins, 1996), to establish what is real (Higgins, 2012) and to reduce uncertainty (e.g., Kruglanski, 2004). The greater epistemic needs from ambiguous experiences, the more people seek a shared reality with others (Echterhoff, Higgins, et al., 2009; Festinger, 1950).

Saying-is-believing studies support the notion that the communicator’s shared-reality motivation is critical. For instance, when audience tuning of the message is motivated by alternative, non-shared reality motives (e.g., obtaining a reward, or complying with blatant demands), communicators’ memory is not biased toward the audience’s attitude (Echterhoff, Higgins, Kopietz, & Groll, 2008). Thus, audience tuning of the message will lead to audience-congruent memory only when audience tuning is sufficiently motivated by shared-reality concerns.2 In contrast, other research on communication effects on memory has centered on the cognitive processes during message production, such as selective rehearsal (Pasupathi, Stallworth, & Murdoch, 1998) or the formation, or activation, of a schema that continues to guide subsequent recall (Marsh, 2007).

According to a shared-reality account, the epistemic needs driving shared-reality creation are elicited by the ambiguity of the stimulus material. However, this central assumption has never been tested in experimental research. The main purpose of the present research was to fill this gap. Specifically, shared-reality creation through audience tuning should be more likely under high (vs. low) epistemic uncertainty.

So far, the epistemic-needs account has been examined in only one study (Kopietz, Hellmann, Higgins, & Echterhoff, 2010). In Experiment 2 by Kopietz et al. (2010), negative (vs. positive) ability feedback was used to manipulate high (vs. low) epistemic uncertainty in participants who were previously asked to form social judgments about characters depicted in ambiguous social interactions. It was found that only high-epistemic-uncertainty participants tuned their messages and memory to the audience’s attitude. However, in this study, like in all extant saying-is-believing studies, the target description was carefully designed to be ambiguous, and the same version was used in all conditions. In our Experiment we manipulated perceived stimulus ambiguity for the first time to test its role in shared-reality creation through audience tuning.

2 Application to ambiguous sexual harassment

In our research, we applied this rationale to representations of sexual harassment at the workplace. We chose this domain for the following reasons: First of all, sexual harassment is a widespread social issue (European Agency for Safety and Health at work, 2010). A vexing and notorious feature of sexual harassment is the ambiguity of many of the surrounding behaviors (Pryor & Day, 1988). For instance, the same act of stroking can be interpreted as a flirt or as an act of harassment (Gordon, Cohen, Grauer, & Rogelberg, 2005). Also, sexual harassment involves negative outcomes for at least one of the involved parties, and people are particularly motivated to interpret and understand events with a negative or disconcerting outcome (Baumeister, 1991). The ambiguity and potentially harmful consequences of behaviors involved in sexual harassment are likely to elicit epistemic uncertainty, which can be reduced by creating a shared reality through communication. Because the workplace is an arena of constant talk and gossip it should be conducive to such communicative processes.

We tested whether shared reality through audience tuning depends on the perceived ambiguity of the harassment scenario. At the workplace, sexual harassment often unfolds over time, starting with subtle gestures or remarks and proceeding to more blatant and overt forms of harassment (Gordon et al., 2005). During this process, the ambiguity of surrounding behaviors is higher at the beginning of a potential harassment episode and decreases sharply when the potential harasser performs blatant acts of harassment, such as offering career benefits for sexual favors. Given these characteristics of the identification of sexual harassment, workplace is particularly outcome-sensitive. This outcome sensitivity allowed us to employ a manipulation of ambiguity that involved only a minimal change of the target material, specifically the addition of brief outcome information revealing unambiguous harassment.

3 The present research

To apply the saying-is-believing paradigm to the context of sexual harassment we made the following adaptations. We created a scenario describing interactions between a male supervisor and a female employee. This input material included the same number of harassment-consistent and harassment-inconsistent behaviors and did not end in clear-cut sexual harassment. Participants wrote their message about the target person (i.e., the supervisor) to a female audience, a colleague of the employee, who presumably either liked or disliked the target person. The liking information was employed to manipulate the audience’s attitude. The audience’s ostensible task was to identify the target person from a set of other employees. The ambiguity of the input material should provoke uncertainty and hence epistemic needs that motivate participants to seek a shared reality with their audience (Echterhoff, Higgins, et al., 2009).

As in previous saying-is-believing studies, the main dependent measures were the valence (evaluative tone) of message and the valence of recall. The valence measures allow researchers to

2 We note that shared-reality motivation does not imply, or require, an explicit or conscious representation of adaptation to the audience. Extant theorizing has distinguished shared-reality motivation from a conscious intention to tune one’s message to the audience (Echterhoff, Higgins, et al., 2009). This distinction has received empirical support. For instance, when the intention to adapt one’s message to the audience is experimentally induced, the audience-tuning effect on communicators’ subsequent cognition is reduced or eliminated (Echterhoff et al., 2008; Kopietz et al., 2010; Todorov, 2002), presumably because the goal of demonstrating overt adaptation to the audience becomes more important than shared-reality goals. Taken together, the empirical evidence suggests that the audience-tuning effect is supported by the communicators’ private motivation to achieve a shared reality with the audience, but impeded by efforts of demonstrating public compliance.
analyze the audience-congruency of recall. Message and recall are audience-congruent when they are more positive in the positive (vs. negative) audience-attitude condition. Consistent with extant research, a shared reality is achieved through the audience-congruent adaptation of both the valence of the message and the valence of recall.

First, a pilot study\(^3\) extended the saying-is-believing paradigm to communication about potential, ambiguous sexual harassment: No disambiguating outcome information was provided. Participants tuned their messages about a potential harasser to their audience’s attitude and later exhibited audience-congruent memories. Hence, participants created a shared reality through communication with their audience and thus disambiguated the event.

In our experiment we manipulated the ambiguity of the input material. Specifically, we employed the same version of the story in two experimental conditions except for one difference, that is, whether the story ended in clear-cut sexual harassment. The unambiguous outcome information stated briefly that the supervisor finally offered a promotion in exchange for sexual favors (i.e., *quid pro quo* harassment). In the absence of such outcome information, the ambiguity of the target material and uncertainty should be high. In contrast, when the harassment outcome is provided, the ambiguity of the target material is resolved; hence, evaluative uncertainty should be low.\(^4\) In this case, perceivers should feel that the antecedent behaviors have naturally led to the outcome (Carli, 1999), analogous to hindsight judgments (Fischhoff, 1975).

Drawing on shared-reality theory, we predicted that participants in the unknown-outcome (vs. known-outcome) condition should feel greater uncertainty. Hence, participants in the unknown-outcome condition should be more likely to tune their messages to their audience and exhibit audience-congruent memories. In contrast, in the known-outcome condition epistemic uncertainty and the motivation to create a shared reality should be rather low. Participants in this condition might still adapt their messages to the audience’s attitude to facilitate the audience’s task completion (ostensibly, identification of the target). However, we did not create other, alternative goals to induce audience tuning (as in Echterhoff et al., 2008). In the absence of such goals, participants in the known-outcome condition may not be sufficiently motivated to tune their messages to the audience. In sum, we expected that it was unlikely that participants’ messages or recall would be audience-congruent in this condition.

We also measured participants’ trust in their audience. Participants who are motivated to create a shared reality should do so to greater extent when they trust their audience’s judgment (Echterhoff et al., 2005, 2008). Hence, in the unknown-outcome condition, where shared-reality motivation should be high, participants’ trust in the audience should be positively correlated with the magnitude of the audience-congruent memory bias. In the known-outcome condition, where shared-reality motivation should be low, this correlation should be lower or absent. Gender had a main effect (but did not interact with audience attitude) in the pilot study (see Footnote 3). To reduce variance resulting from gender differences we ran the experiment with female participants only.

### 4. Method

#### 4.1. Participants and design

We calculated the sample size required to detect audience-attitude effects on recall. Several previous studies have obtained large effects ($n^2 = 0.26$) despite variations in target material and methodology (Echterhoff et al., 2005, 2013; Echterhoff, Lang, et al., 2009; Kopietz et al., 2010). For the conservative estimate of $n^2 = 0.26$ for the effect size, a power of 0.8, and a Type I error threshold of $p = 0.05$, the cell size needed to detect the effect is $n = 12$, calculated with the software G*Power (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009).

The sample for our study consisted of 60 female psychology students ($M_{age} = 19.10$ years) at a Belgian university, who participated for course credit. They were randomly assigned to one of four conditions of a 2 × 2 design: audience attitude: positive vs. negative) × 2 (outcome knowledge: known vs. unknown outcome) between–participants design. The cell sizes slightly exceeded those suggested by the sample–size calculation (see Table 1). The main dependent measures were the evaluative tone of message and recall regarding the target person.

#### 4.2. Materials and procedure

The experiment ostensibly concerned impression formation based on others’ testimonies and was administered in two different sessions, separated by a one-week delay. In Session 1, participants read a testimony made by Valérie, a female employee in a counseling center. The testimony referred to her workplace experiences and consisted of descriptions of eight mildly harassment-consistent, eight harassment-inconsistent behaviors, and six behaviors unrelated to the potential harassment issue (Marchal, 2007). The ambiguity thus resulted from the mix of negative or inappropriate (harassment-consistent) and positive or appropriate (harassment-inconsistent) behaviors, rather than from the ambiguity of single behaviors.

We selected descriptions that were most frequently categorized as harassment-consistent or harassment-inconsistent behaviors in

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\(^3\) In the pilot study, 96 students (52% male, $M_{age} = 20.90$) were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (audience attitude toward the potential harasser: positive vs. negative). Participants received an ambiguous harassment scenario without outcome information (see Section 4.2 of the main study). To assess participants’ perception of uncertainty, we used an experience-based measure of behavioral ambiguity (Jonas et al., 2000): Participants evaluated the ambiguity of the information about the potential harasser’s behavior on 3 items ranging from 1 (not ambiguous at all) to 8 (ambiguous). Cronbach’s $\alpha = .83$. The mean rating of behavioral ambiguity was $M = 4.83$ ($SD = 1.60$), which was significantly higher than the midpoint: $t(95) = 2.00, p = .048$. The ambiguity is assumed to elicit epistemic needs that can be satisfied by shared-reality creation (Echterhoff, Higgins, et al., 2009).

Importantly, both message and recall valence were more positive in the positive audience-attitude condition ($M = 0.06, SD = .47$, and $M = .04, SD = .46$, for message and recall respectively) than in the negative audience-attitude condition ($M = -.11, SD = .45$, and $M = -.13, SD = .51$, respectively). $F(1,93) = 4.12, p < .05, \eta^2 = .04$, and $F(1,93) = 3.63, p < .06, \eta^2 = .04$, for message and recall respectively. When controlling for gender in a two-way ANOVA, the audience-attitude effects remained significant ($F(1,93) = 4.11, p < .05, \eta^2 = .04$, and $F(1,93) = 3.59, p = .061, \eta^2 = .04$, for message and recall, respectively, and were not qualified by gender ($Fs < 1$). Of minor interest, message and recall protocols were more negative for male participants ($M = -.15, SD = .45$, and $M = -.15, SD = .48$) than for female participants ($M = -.13, SD = .45$, and $M = .09, SD = .47$). $f(1,93) = 9.73, p < .002, \eta^2 = .10$, and $f(1,93) = 6.91, p < .01, \eta^2 = .07$, for message and recall, respectively.

\(^4\) We note that several saying-is-believing studies (e.g., Higgins & McCann, 1984; Higgins & Rhoades, 1978; McCann & Hancock, 1983; McCann, Higgins, & Fondacaro, 1991) have used some ambiguous (clearly positive and negative) behavioral passages about the target, in addition to ambiguous behavioral passages. Ambiguous (vs. unambiguous) passages were more likely to be distorted in the direction of the audience’s attitude. However, the procedure of these early studies differs from our approach: Ambiguity was manipulated within subjects and at the level of single items. In contrast, we manipulate perceived ambiguity between subjects for the same input material. Also, previous studies have mainly relied on target material consisting of a heterogeneous assembly of unrelated behavioral descriptions. The only exceptions are studies by Kopietz et al. (2009) and Hellmann, Echterhoff, Kopietz, Bijnens, and Memon (2011, Experiment 2), who applied the paradigm to eyewitness incidents, a contextually relevant domain. However, those studies did not test whether the obtained effects depended on the ambiguity of the material because ambiguity was not manipulated.
Table 1
Means of message valence and recall valence as a function of audience attitude and of participants’ outcome knowledge (known- vs. unknown-outcome).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Audience attitude</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>η²</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message</td>
<td>Known</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recall</td>
<td>Known</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The F and p scores refer to tests of simple main effects of audience attitude. As effect size we report partial eta-squared (η²); n=15 in each of the four conditions (audience attitude x outcome knowledge).

Participants were informed that their audience’s (Charlotte’s) task was to identify the target person described (anonymously) in their message from a list of several employees.

At the end of this first session of the experiment, participants rated their epistemic trust in the audience (i.e., Charlotte) on 3 items (e.g., “To what extent do you trust Charlotte’s judgment about others?”) ranging from 1 (not at all) to 9 (very much). Cronbach’s α=75. Ratings were averaged. Participants were then asked not to forget to participate in the second session of the experiment one week later. Audience-tuning effects on cognition have been shown to persist with message-recall intervals of such length (McCann & Higgins, 1992).

In Session 2, participants were asked to report all information about the target person they remembered reading in the testimony a week before (free-recall task). As the message instruction, the recall instruction required participants to focus specifically on one target (i.e., the supervisor).

Participants then completed manipulation checks: They reported the outcome of the scenario they had received, choosing between sexual harassment, three other outcomes (“Patrick did nothing but spread malicious rumors about what she asked him”, “Patrick did his best to renew the contract without asking for anything in exchange”, and “Patrick did not do anything that could benefit or harm his employee”) and no outcome. They also rated their audience’s attitude toward the target on a 9-point scale (from 1, extremely negative, to 9, extremely positive). Moreover, we assessed participants’ feeling of uncertainty about the outcome. Participants estimated how likely they would have found a negative outcome of the testimony in percentage scores (i.e., “Patrick did nothing for the renewal of Valérie’s contract but spread malicious rumors about her”) and a positive outcome to it (i.e., “Patrick did everything he could to guarantee the renewal of the contract without asking for anything in exchange”). Participants in the known-outcome condition were instructed to respond as if they had not known the outcome. We computed the absolute difference between the estimation of the negative and the positive outcome (Breckler, 1994; Jonas, Bromer, & Diehl, 2000). A value of zero indicates that both outcomes were judged as equally likely. The lower the value the greater participants’ uncertainty. Finally, we conducted a funnel debriefing, in which participants answered increasingly specific questions about the presumed hypothesis.

4.3. Coding and computation of measures

The evaluative tone of the message protocols regarding the supervisor’s behavior was coded by two coders, who were blind to experimental conditions. Two different coders, also blind to the experimental conditions, coded the evaluative tone of the recall protocols. Coders were not given information about the type of protocol (i.e., message or recall). Each protocol was broken down into passages corresponding to the passages of the original input

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5 Please note that the threshold for perceiving behaviors as sexually harassing is higher in Belgium than in other Western countries like the United States (Zippel, 2000).

6 French polite form of the English “you”.

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information. They identified harassment-consistency of each passage concerning the supervisor’s behavior: harassment-consistent (HC), harassment-inconsistent (HI) or harassment-unrelated (HU). They also ceded the type of distortion of the reported behavior (negative distortion, positive distortion, or no distortion). Good intercoder reliability was achieved for both item category (κmessage = .97, κrecall = .99), and type of distortion (κmessage = .89 and κrecall = .94). HC and HI items in message and recall protocols were assigned weights depending on whether they were positively or negatively distorted. The weights were positive for HI behaviors and negative for HC behaviors to reflect the evaluative tone of the behavior. The weight was ±1.5 if the distortion further intensified the valence of the behavior (i.e., a positive distortion of HI behaviors or a negative distortion of HC behaviors, respectively), ±1 if there was no evaluative distortion for HI and HC behaviors, respectively, and ±.5 if the distortion attenuated the valence of the behavior (i.e., a positive distortion of HC behaviors or a negative distortion of HI behaviors, respectively).

The overall valence was the sum of the weighted scores for all HI and HC behaviors mentioned in a (message or recall) protocol, divided by the total number of all coded behaviors (HI, HC, and HU behaviors). The greater the score, the more positive the target person (i.e., the supervisor) was characterized in a protocol. The valence score varied from −1.50 to +.75 for message valence, and from −.50 to +.76 for recall valence.

To capture the magnitude of the audience-congruent bias of participants’ message and recall independent of the audience attitude we calculated unipolar message and recall bias scores: As in Echterhoff et al. (2005, 2008) and Kopietz et al. (2010), we multiplied valence scores in the negative attitude condition by −1, while leaving valence scores in the positive attitude condition unchanged. Thus, higher scores of the message and the recall bias measures indicate more bias toward the audience’s attitude.

Accurate rehearsal and retrieval of the input information may limit or reduce the audience-congruent memory bias (see Echterhoff et al., 2008; Kopietz et al., 2010). Message production allows communicators to rehearse the original target material. The narrative closure provided in the known-outcome condition could facilitate the construction of a story schema, which might support rehearsal and retrieval of the story elements (Tversky & Marsh, 2000). A reduced audience–attitude effect on recall in this condition could be due to more accurate memory for the material. To control for this possibility, we assessed the accuracy of both rehearsal (i.e., message accuracy) and retrieval (i.e., recall accuracy) by counting all correct items remembered for each item category in the message and recall protocols (i.e., sum of all harassment-consistent, harassment-inconsistent and harassment-unrelated behaviors).

5. Results

We report analyses of variance (ANOVAs) with partial eta squared (ηp²) as an effect size measure for main and interaction effects and exact p values from two-tailed tests.

5.1. Manipulation checks

The audience’s attitude was perceived as more positive in the positive audience-attitude condition (M = 6.50, SD = 2.16) than in the negative audience-attitude condition (M = 4.03, SD = 2.17), F(1, 58) = 19.43, p < .001, ηp² = .25.

In the known-outcome condition, most participants correctly remembered receiving the sexual harassment outcome (93.3%), whereas the majority of participants in the unknown-outcome condition correctly remembered that they did not receive any outcome (76.7%).

Moreover, as predicted, the measure of certainty (i.e., lower uncertainty) about the outcome of the scenario was higher in the known-outcome condition (M = 24.98, SD = 19.61) than in the unknown-outcome condition (M = 14.70, SD = 10.10), F(1, 58) = 6.52, p = .013, ηp² = .10. Thus, participants in this latter condition appeared to be more uncertain about the supervisor’s final behavior.

5.2. Message and recall valence

Table 1 depicts the means for message valence (top panel) and recall valence (bottom panel). First, a 2 × 2 ANOVA yielded a main effect of audience attitude, F(1, 56) = 12.47, p = .001, ηp² = .18. This effect was qualified by a significant interaction between audience attitude and outcome knowledge, F(1, 56) = 5.37, p = .024, ηp² = .09. Follow-up analyses revealed a simple main effect of audience attitude in the unknown-outcome condition (for test statistics, see Table 1). Thus, participants in this condition adapted their message to their audience’s attitude. However, in the known-outcome condition the effect was not statistically significant. The effect of outcome knowledge was non-significant, F < 1.

Second, the evaluative tone of free recall was also biased in the direction of the audience’s attitude, as revealed by a main effect of audience attitude, F(1, 55) = 4.39, p = .041, ηp² = .07. The simple main effect of audience attitude was significant for participants without outcome knowledge, but not for participants in the known-outcome condition. No other effects reached significance, Fs < 1.14.

5.3. Accuracy of message and recall protocols

We found no evidence that message and recall protocols contained more accurate reproductions in the known-outcome condition (M = 3.90, SD = 2.31 and M = 2.68, SD = 2.45) than in the unknown-outcome condition (M = 3.40, SD = 2.25 and M = 2.76, SD = 2.32), both Fs < 1, for message and recall, respectively. Thus, the reduced audience–attitude effects in the known-outcome condition cannot be explained by more accurate rehearsal or retrieval of the story elements.

Note that our memory measure (recall valence) is designed to capture evaluative biases in free recall. Our measure thus differs from memory measures capturing the quantity of correctly remembered items (Puff, 1982). The present divergence between the two measures is consistent with several audience-tuning studies (Kopietz, Echterhoff, Niemeier, Hellmann, & Memon, 2009; Kopietz et al., 2010), in which our valence measure and traditional, accuracy-oriented measures were dissociated.

7 To illustrate, consider the following behavior from the original target information: “Patrick always looked at me from top to bottom, every time I passed in front of him.” A reproduction of this behavior (in either a message or recall protocol) was coded as “not distorted” when the propositional content of the original passage was preserved (Van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983), as for instance in “Patrick started to gaze at her each time he saw her”. Because the behavior is harassment-consistent and thus negative, it received the weight −1. When the propositional content was distorted, different weights scores were assigned depending on the type of distortion. The reproduction “He is not afraid to undress women with his eyes” is an example of a negative distortion, which intensifies the (already negative) valence of the (harassment-consistent) behavior and was thus coded with −1.5. The reproduction “He sometimes looked at Valerie from top to bottom” is an example of a positive distortion, because it attenuates the (negative) valence of the behavior. Thus, it was coded with −.5. For harassment-inconsistent behaviors, the coding was analogous, with weights ranging from −5 to +1.5.
5.4. **Moderation of the audience attitude-message-recall path**

To establish the role of message production in the observed memory bias, we tested whether the observed effect of audience attitude on recall valence was mediated by message valence. Thus, we examined whether the present finding reflected a saying-is-believing effect, rather than merely a knowing the audience’s attitude-is-believing effect. Importantly, according to our rationale, the mediation should be weaker, or even absent, when the outcome is known. That is, the path from audience attitude via message valence to recall valence should be moderated by outcome knowledge (Hayes, 2013). We tested such a moderated mediation (see Fig. 1) using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013). Bootstrapping is considered to be the most valid and reliable method for assessing indirect effects (Hayes, 2009). Because it does not make assumptions about parameter distributions (Chernick, 2008), it produces robust estimates even with relatively small sample sizes.

We implemented Process model 7 by Hayes (2013) using 5000 bootstrap samples (see Fig. 1). Consistent with the earlier analysis of variance, the effect of audience on message valence (coded as −1 for negative attitude and 1 for positive attitude) was stronger when the outcome was unknown (b = 28, confidence interval from .14 to .41) than when it was known (b = .06, ns). Also, as predicted, the audience’s attitude predicted message valence, which, in turn, predicted recall valence. However, the effect of the audience’s attitude on message valence was moderated by outcome knowledge (dummy-coded as −1 = unknown, 1 = known). The indirect effect of audience attitude on recall valence through message valence was reliable only in the unknown-outcome condition, b (for the indirect effect) = .07, confidence interval from .01 to .14. In the known-outcome condition, this indirect effect was absent, b = .01, ns. Thus, this suggests that only in the unknown-outcome condition the production of an audience-consistent message influenced memory. While the obtained effects are not large, they are still consistent with the predicted role of outcome knowledge.

5.5. **Audience trust**

Participants’ trust in their audience’s attitude was positively correlated with both message bias and recall bias only in the unknown-outcome condition, r(28) = .41, p = .025, and r(28) = .36, p = .051, respectively. In the known-outcome condition, these correlations were not positive and nonsignificant, r(28) = −.20, and r(27) = −.27, ns. The trust-message bias and trust-recall bias correlations (Fisher z-transformed) differed significantly between the outcome knowledge conditions, Z = 2.26, p = .023, and Z = 2.29, p = .022, respectively.

6. **Discussion**

In our study, participants who lacked definite outcome knowledge aligned both their message and their memory about a potential harasser with their audience’s attitude. Such alignment was not found for participants who possessed outcome knowledge. Participants who did not know the outcome reported greater epistemic uncertainty, which suggests that they experienced higher epistemic needs regarding the interpretation of the event. A moderated mediation analysis provided further support for the effect of outcome knowledge: The path from audience-attitude via message to recall was significant only in the unknown-outcome condition. Moreover, participants’ trust in the audience was significantly correlated with the message and recall bias in the unknown-outcome condition, but not in the known-outcome condition. This result suggests that when the ambiguity of the stimulus material was high (vs. low), participants aligned their messages and memory with the audience’s position more strongly the more they trusted their audience.

Taken together, the findings suggest that when perceivers experience uncertainty about actual sexual harassment, they are motivated to rely on others’ assessments in forming their own representation of the event, which continues to shape their memory. According to our theorizing, the creation of a shared reality through audience tuning apparently depends on epistemic needs that are elicited by the ambiguity of the perceived event.

By choosing potential sexual harassment, a ubiquitous incident with potentially distressing consequences, as the stimulus material, we extended the present approach to a novel applied context. To form judgments about the potential harassment at the workplace, perceivers may seek judgments offered by others, for instance, a colleague who knows the persons involved in potential harassment. Clearly, creating shared evaluations among colleagues can have serious consequences for the reputation of both potential victim and aggressor.

One implication of our research is that, until proven guilty, perpetrators’ behaviors may be remembered as relatively harmless, unless they are already notoriously disliked by relevant others. By uncovering these processes, the present study contributes to further our understanding of the “spiral of silence” that often surrounds sexual harassment.

5.4. **Conflict of interest statement**

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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