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Reasons for reason-giving in unplanned discourse

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1. Introduction

In this paper I investigate the phenomenon of unsolicited reason-giving which often occurs in everyday conversation. Specifically, I draw upon data from an anonymous public-opinion survey conducted over the telephone in which respondents give reasons for their answers even though such elaboration is discouraged and will not be recorded on the survey. This data provides an opportunity to investigate reason-giving in unplanned adult discourse within the scope of personal opinion. I ask two particular questions of this reason-giving: 1) In what contexts do respondents provide unsolicited reasons for their answers, that is, what kind of questions most often result in reason-giving; and 2) What kind of reasons do respondents provide. In addition, I ask the broader question of why people give reasons at all. The results suggest that the first two questions can be answered by considering personal opinion as an argument field, with its own preferred type of justifications and warrants. I address the second, broader question of why people give reasons at all by interpreting the reason-giving shown here as critical thinking. In conclusion I suggest that a close look at this unsolicited reason-giving demonstrates with Alvin Goldman's idea of personal justification (P-justification) (Goldman, 1997). The idea of P-justification provides a bridge to work in rhetorical theory, which calls for "humanness" as a necessary condition for effective communication. This leads me to suggest that reason-giving in the opinion-poll interviews serves as a way for respondents to present themselves as human and thoughtfully reasonable rather than as a strategy to argue for their claims.

2. The Texas Poll

The data used in this study comes from the Texas Poll, an anonymous public-opinion poll, is conducted quarterly under the sponsorship of Harte-Hanks Communication. Each quarter's survey includes questions asked by the Texas A&M University Public Policy Resources Laboratory (affiliated with the political science department), which conducts the poll. The answers to these questions are syndicated to the press. In addition, the survey asks questions for public agencies and academic researchers, who pay to have their questions included and for statistical analyses of the answers. Commercial business such as marketing research is not accepted. Respondents each quarter are 1,000 residents of Texas, selected by means of a random telephone "digit sampling frame." Interviewers are trained and paid by the Public Policy Resources Laboratory. Most interviewers are female college students around 20 years old and most are from middle to upper-middle class urban or suburban families. No attempt is made to match interviewers and respondents demographically, except when a respondent requests to be interviewed in Spanish; the bilingual interviewers are Hispanic Americans.

Like other such surveys, the Texas Poll is a standardized, scheduled interview (all respondents are meant to answer the same questions, and the wording and order of the questions is specified), which includes both open-ended and fixed-alternative (multiple-choice) questions. Interviews are structured around a schedule of questions that combines elements of a flow chart with elements of a script.

Questions are asked in topical sets. In the survey I use here, questions include, for example, a set about how various public officials are performing, a set about skin cancer, a set about the supercollider which was then planned for construction in Texas, and a set about abortion. The questionnaire prescribes exact wording for the introductory portion of the interview and for each question, as well as for topic shifts between sets of questions ("On a different topic;" "On another subject;" "Now we want to ask you a question about families"). If it starts promptly and if nothing occurs except for question-asking and answering, and interview lasts about 20 minutes. Not all are that short.

occurs except for question-asking and answering, and interview lasts about 20 minutes. Not all are that short, however. The tapes on which the interviews were recorded lasted 45 minutes, and some interviews were longer than that.

For this analysis 36 interviews were taped and transcribed from the January, 1989 run of the poll. These were chosen, for the purposes of another project, to include at least one interview from each of the 24 interviewers who conducted the survey as well as seven additional interviews by one of the female interviewers and five additional interviews by one of the male interviewers. There are of course 36 different respondents, since no one was interviewed twice. All the respondents in our sample are Anglo-American residents of Texas; they include men and women and people of a variety of ages and income and education levels. The number of unsolicited reasons in each interview ranged from none to 20.[1]

3. Contexts for Unsolicited Reasons

The first step in analyzing the data was to categorize the types of questions asked in the survey. In order to categorize, I determined the kind of claim, either factual, policy, or value that the question was asking the respondent to make. This proceeded from the thought that perhaps certain types of claims elicited more justification than others. Factual questions asked for some sort of objective information, either personal or impersonal. For example, a personal factual claim question is, "Do you regularly use a tanning booth or a sun lamp to work on your tan?" An impersonal factual claim question asks the respondent to give some fact on a topic other than themselves: "What do you think the most important issues are with respect to nuclear power? "A policy question required respondents to advocate a course of public policy: "Would you agree or disagree with a law that would require a one week waiting period before a hand gun could be purchased?" A value question asked the respondent to judge the goodness of something: "How would you rate the job George Bush has done since the election-excellent, good, only fair, or poor?" Overall, there were 88 factual questions (50 personal and 38 impersonal), 17 policy questions, and 5 value questions, for a total of 110 questions in the survey.

As Table 1 shows [see Table 1], the 36 surveys included a total of 3,960 questions, of which 174, or 4.4%, received answers that included unsolicited reasons. Fact and value answers were answered with reasons at roughly the same rate: 4.0% of the impersonal fact answers and 3.4% of personal fact answers had unsolicited reasons, and 4.9% of the value answers had unsolicited reasons. Answers to policy questions, however, included unsolicited reasons at over three times this rate: 13.8% of the policy answers included unsolicited reasons.

4. Types of Unsolicited Reasons

The next step in the analysis was to look at the type of reasons used by the respondents. In a previous study of reason-giving in which people were asked to convince an imaginary hostage-taker to release hostages, Rieke (1981) found that adults in this situation appealed mostly to authority, social pressure, threats, moral obligation and switching the burden. He suggested that the prominence of these types of reasons are more or less typical of supplicatory reasoning. In addition he found other types of reasons which were not used as often: analogy, alternatives, closure attempts and self interest. In my own investigation, I began with Rieke's categories and then studied half of the reasons given by the respondents in order to develop more categories. Other common types of reasons that evolved into categories were sentiment, belief, personal fact, and impersonal fact. An example of an appeal to sentiment is "Uh, I'd just have to say fair since I'm not real wild about him," in response to the value question of how Bill Clements was doing as governor of Texas. The reason this respondent gives for making the claim "fair" is because she is "not real wild about him." In contrast, one respondent answered the question about how George Bush was doing in office by stating that "He just got elected, so, uh, I guess good." This respondent draws upon an impersonal fact, "he just got elected" as grounds for his claim that Bush is doing a good job. Some appeals were to beliefs, as when one respondent said "I don't believe in abortion," when asked about the circumstances under which abortion should be

legal. Table 2 [see Table 2] lays out what was found.

Two observations stand out on the basis of this analysis: 1) Personal fact is the most common mode of appeal in the unsolicited reasons. People say things about themselves, in other words, to explain why they are answering as they are. This is particularly the case when people are asked about themselves: when people are asked about facts about themselves, they give reasons for their answers involving other facts about themselves. Twenty-three of the 174 reasons we studied were of this kind. For example:

> **Interviewer:** We are interested in how people are getting along financially these days. Would you say that you (and your family living there) are better off or worse off than a year ago?
>
> **Respondent:** since I'm retired and drawing a social security check, I guess I'm in the uh-the same.

Here, the respondent justifies his claim, of "same," with the personal fact that he is "retired and drawing a social security check." People also appeal to facts about themselves in other contexts, when giving answers that make claims about impersonal facts, values, and, to a lesser extent, policy. 2) Although, as noted, people relatively often give reasons related to their own authority, rooted in their own experience, appeals to authority other than the authority of the speaker him- or herself are rare in this corpus, no matter what type of claim is called for. Also relatively rare overall are appeals to value though it should be noted that appeals to value would be unlikely in connection with claims about facts in any case (arguing about what is true on the basis of what should be true apparently seems fallacious to people), and most of the questions required claims about facts.

A final category that evolved is what I call meta-thinking. This category differs from the others in that it is not an appeal in order to justify an answer. Rather, with the reasoning displayed in these instances the respondent mitigates a claim or reflects upon his or her own thinking process or knowledge state, or on the question itself. For example, one respondent said "I'm too uneducated to tell you" in response to a question about nuclear energy. At times meta-thinking accompanied the other kinds of appeals. We divided the meta-thinking category into four subcategories: 1) qualifiers, when respondents used words such as, "I guess..." that mitigate the knowledge claim being made, 2) self-reflection, when respondents made comments about themselves; 3) comment on question, when respondents directly commented on the question; and 4) don't know, when the respondents talked about why they didn't know the answer. Table 3 [see Table 3] shows what was found.

As the table shows, meta-thinking of all kinds is most common in responses to questions that ask the respondents to make factual claims about things other than themselves. Whether people do or don't know the answers to such questions, they are more likely to think aloud about the questions and their state of knowledge in this context than when they are asked about themselves or asked to make value or policy claims. This may have to do with the fact that the evidentiary stakes are highest in responses to impersonal factual questions: you can be wrong about answers to questions like these in a way you can't be wrong in your answers to questions about yourself or about what is good or bad or what policies should be adopted. This could explain the increased use of qualifiers in this setting, as people try to lower the stakes somewhat by mitigating their claims.

5. Discussion: Reasons for Reasons

This study gives rise to the following observations about unsolicited reason-giving in an anonymous public-opinion survey:

1. People give reasons for claims even when they are discouraged from doing so and when it is not obvious what purpose it serves in the activity.

purpose it serves in the activity.

2. The survey respondents give reasons for policy claims three times as frequently as they give reasons for value or factual claims.

3. In the reasons overall, respondents appeal to their personal experience, not to external authority.

4. Respondents talk about their thought processes, especially when the evidentiary stakes are high.

In light of these observations I would like to return to my original questions: 1) In what contexts do respondents provide unsolicited reasons for their answers; 2) What kind of reasons do respondents provide; and 3) Why do people give unsolicited reasons at all in this context?

In answer to the first two questions we have seen that survey respondents most often give reasons for policy claims and appeal to personal experience over other types of justifications. These observations build upon previous studies of reason-giving in specific argument fields. In his 1981 study of argument fields Rieke concluded that the data of this study suggest that reasoning is field specific and further studies in other fields or situations of reasoning is suggested in order to understand better how reasoning is organized into fields, populations, communities, and forums.(p. 590)

Rieke and Willbrand's (1981) study of supplication in children and adults showed that children often demonstrate adult strategies in supplication but do not use self-interest as often as adults. Their study also supported the idea that reasoning differs from field to field and in planned and unplanned discourse. In the Texas Poll Survey that asks individuals their *opinions*, respondents drew most on personal facts as reasons. Also unlike the previous study, in this situation authority was one of the least used reasons, while in supplication it was heavily used. In addition, values or morals were much used in supplication and seldom used in the survey, except in the case of policy claims. These differences in types of reasons used in supplication and in the opinion poll support Toulmin's concept of an argument field, defined by different purposes and therefore entailing different argumentative strategies. This study also suggests that different claims, within the same field, may call for different strategies and types of reasons.

Now by considering the reason-giving performed by the respondents, I would like to address the broader question of why people give unsolicited reasons in this public-opinion survey. I will not attempt to investigate all possible reasons for the reason-giving behavior identified in this data. Such possibilities include efforts at politeness so that their short answers do not sound brusque (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Another very practical factor could be time-filling while the respondents are thinking of their answer. Pauses in conversation can often be interpreted as a signal to change turns (Sacks et al. 1974) or they are perceived as awkward. Preventing negative connotations might also be a motivation for reason giving. For example, when asked "Do you think your family will be worse off next year?" An affirmative might suggest a loss of job or some other negative connotation, but when a reason is given, "I'll have two kids in college," the force of such negative connotations is mitigated. Finally, there is the idiosyncratic factor. Some individuals may simply have the habit of being more talkative and explaining everything, but a comparison of styles of individual reason-giving of these respondents is beyond the scope of this paper

I would like to suggest that these acts of reason-giving are instances of critical thinking. Rieke and Sillars (1997) describe critical thinking as "a mini-debate you carry on with yourself" (p. 9). They differentiate it from argumentation

by the fact that it is internal and personal, rather than an external and public action: "While argumentation is a social process (audience-centered), it involves engaging individuals in making up their minds on how to act through communication with other people."(p. 8). In other words, argumentation can be both a social and an individual process. Others in informal logic and critical thinking characterize it as the justification of beliefs or reflective thought (Eemeren, et al., p. 165). Of particular interest to informal logicians has been Fisher's (1988) "'Assertability Question': What argument of evidence would justify me in asserting the conclusion C?" (p. 131). Further, Siegel

(1998) defines a critical thinker as one who "must be able to assess reasons and their ability to warrant beliefs, claims and actions properly" (p. 34). The reason-giving expressed by the respondents of this survey can be read as efforts to assess the reasons they have to warrant a claim:

Interviewer: (1) Texas has been chosen as a site of the supercollider. Have you ever heard anything about the supercollider?

Respondent: It's something about atoms. (1) Yeah, I've heard a little bit.

Interviewer: (2) [Do you] strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree [that] nuclear power plants lead to higher electric bills?

Respondent: (3) What's the one between agree and strongly disagree?

Interviewer: disagree

Respondent: um, Just plain old disagree. Uh, mmm (4) I agree. I guess you have to pay for it, so I guess it would bring your electricity bill up.

Interviewer: (3) How serious do you think sunburns are in increasing the future risk of skin cancer for children? Very serious, somewhat serious, not very serious, or not serious at all?

Respondent: Uhh, maybe not as much as adul-Well, I guess I'd have to say serious since they would uh (2)

Interviewer: ok

Respondent: Because it can develop over time. They're not going to happen overnight.

In these examples the respondents seem to be searching for what evidence they have in order to justify a claim. In this sense these instances of reason-giving can be viewed as moments of critical thinking aloud in which the respondents articulate their thinking process in coming to a claim.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to point out a relationship I see between the results of this study, that personal opinion might be considered an argument field and reason-giving in unplanned discourse as an act of critical thinking, and Alvin Goldman's discussion of P-justification in his article "Argumentation and Interpersonal Justification" (1997). In this article he maintains that "there is such a thing as personal justification (P-justification), which is an individual matter, and that a cognitive agent can be personally justified (P-justified) in believing a proposition without having any relevant justificational relation to other people."(p. 156). Further, he states, "in saying...that there is a core nonsocial notion of justification, I mean that a belief can be justified in virtue of such condition as the believer's perceptual experiences and/or prior beliefs, rather than his/her relations to other thinkers" (p. 156). Thus, for Goldman all justification is based on personal justification, that first, one must be personally convinced of claim before one can convince someone else.

If we think of a person's justification as a matter of the evidence possessed by the person, and if evidence-possession consists of the person's having certain beliefs and/or perceptual experience, then we have a personal interpretation of the justification condition, an interpretation that readily comports with the assumption that one person might be justified in believing a given argument's premises while another person might not be so justified. (p. 160)

The heavy reliance on personal experience found in this survey data supports Goldman's claim that people must be personally justified in holding a belief and that for different people, the acceptability of reasons for making claims will be different. In this survey, many people gave reasons for their answer to the question. "How would you rate the job

be different. In this survey, many people gave reasons for their answer to the question, "How would you rate the job George Bush has done since the election--excellent, good, only fair, or poor?" Here are four different responses to this question:

Respondent: (1) It's only a couple of days. Can't tell.

Respondent: (2) Well I would say only fair because he hasn't really done anything yet.

Respondent: (3) Well he hasn't been there very long. I don't know. Can't comment on that. He's only been in office one day.

Interviewer: so you don't know?

Respondent: No

Interviewer: ok

Respondent: He hasn't made it...committed himself yet.

Respondent: (4) Well, he just got elected, so uh, I guess good?

From these answers it is obvious these surveys took place soon after George Bush entered office. Given this fact which all four of the respondents cite, two say they don't know or can't comment, one answers "fair" and another answers "good." Using the same evidence these respondents make different claims. We can surmise here that their warrants are different for these different individuals, which highlights the very personal nature of justification.

Finally, I'd like to point to the relationship I see between the fundamentally personal nature of justification which Goldman discusses and which our study supports and the idea of ethos in rhetorical theory. One of the criteria of ethos which has been discussed (Kaufer & Butler, 1996) is to "be human," to be an individual person who thinks consistently. I'd like to suggest, in light of the human characteristic of ethos, that another explanation of why people give unsolicited reasons in the public-opinion survey, in addition to thinking aloud in order to come to a claim, is an effort to present themselves as persons, not machines, with individual, unique reasons for their opinions when expressed, which in turn provides an opportunity for interpersonal justification. The goal of giving reasons here is not so much to persuade the interviewer of the *validity of the claim*. Rather, I think the respondents are trying to persuade the interviewer that *they are justified* in their opinions by having the interviewer understand their personal reasoning.

Endnotes

1 This sample, though not designed with this project in mind, is unlikely to favor either people who give especially many reasons or people who give especially few. A study that compared reason-giving across demographic groups, or that made claims about the frequency or the characteristics of reason-giving among human beings as a whole, would have to be based on a more systematically representative sample. But since the goal here is simply to show that reason-giving occurs in a situation in which it might not be expected, to make some observations about when it occurs and what it is like, and to suggest some reasons for it, this sample is adequate.

Table 1: Percentage of answers including unsolicited reasons by type of claim required.

Type of claim required by question	Total answers to questions of this type in the 36 interviews	Number of answers including unsolicited reasons	Percentage of answers including unsolicited reasons
Impersonal Fact	1800	72	4.0
Personal Fact	1368	47	3.4
Value	612	30	4.9
Policy	180	25	13.8
TOTAL	3960	174	4.4

Table 1

Table 2: Types of appeals used to justify claims.

Type of claim required by question:	Personal fact	Impersonal fact	Value	Policy	TOTAL
Type of appeal used in reason:					
sentiment	5	6	3	3	17
personal fact	23	8	6	2	39
impersonal fact	0	5	4	7	16
value	0	1	3	4	8
authority	0	0	1	2	3
alternatives	4	3	1	5	13
analogy	8	0	1	2	11
TOTAL	41	40	25	30	146

Table 2

Table 3: Types of meta-thinking corresponding to types of claims.

Type of claim required by question	Personal Fact	Impersonal Fact	Value	Policy	Total
Type of Meta-thinking					
qualifier	5	19	5	3	33
self-reflection	0	18	4	1	23
reflection on question	0	4	2	2	8
don't know	0	16	9	5	30

Table 3

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