

The Artful Dodger: Answering the Wrong Question the Right Way

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What happens when speakers try to “dodge” a question they would rather not answer by answering a different question? In 4 studies, we show that listeners can fail to detect dodges when speakers answer similar—but objectively incorrect—questions (the “artful dodge”), a detection failure that goes hand-in-hand with a failure to rate dodgers more negatively. We propose that dodges go undetected because listeners’ attention is not usually directed toward a goal of dodge detection (i.e., Is this person answering the question?) but rather toward a goal of social evaluation (i.e., Do I like this person?). Listeners were not blind to all dodge attempts, however. Dodge detection increased when listeners’ attention was diverted from social goals toward determining the relevance of the speaker’s answers (Study 1), when speakers answered a question egregiously dissimilar to the one asked (Study 2), and when listeners’ attention was directed to the question asked by keeping it visible during speakers’ answers (Study 4). We also examined the interpersonal consequences of dodge attempts: When listeners were guided to detect dodges, they rated speakers more negatively (Study 2), and listeners rated speakers who answered a similar question in a fluent manner more positively than speakers who answered the actual question but disfluently (Study 3). These results add to the literatures on both Gricean conversational norms and goal-directed attention. We discuss the practical implications of our findings in the contexts of interpersonal communication and public debates.

Keywords: Gricean norms, conversational implicature, goal-directed attention, inattention blindness

Don’t answer the question you were asked. Answer the question you wish you were asked.

- Robert McNamara, describing the lessons he learned during his time as Secretary of Defense during the Vietnam War (Morris, Williams, & Ahlberg, 2004)

As this opening quote demonstrates, many in public life seek to master the artful dodge, frequently attempting to wriggle out from answering questions they would rather avoid. Although perhaps most grating when performed by politicians, question dodging occurs in a wide array of other contexts: corporate executives avoiding reporters’ requests for their expectations for the next fiscal quarter, employees sidestepping their bosses’ questions as to why they are late for the third straight day, or spouses evading their partners’ inquiries as to their whereabouts the previous evening. Under what conditions does a dodge go undetected, allowing speakers to escape unscathed? In the studies that follow, we show that dodges can go undetected when a speaker responds to a question by offering an answer to a similar question rather than the actual question asked—provided that the listener’s attention is not

directed to explicitly assess whether the speaker answered the question asked. As an illustration, consider a politician who is asked about the illegal drug problem in America and instead provides an answer about the need for universal health care: We suggest that he has engaged in a successful dodge if listeners have forgotten the question he was asked at the end of his answer. Successful (and unsuccessful) question dodging can also have interpersonal consequences; we also explore whether listeners rate the speaker as positively after a successful dodge as they would have had he/she been asked the question answered. Indeed, we propose that in some cases, speakers are evaluated more highly when they answer a similar question fluently than when they answer the correct question disfluently.

How is it possible that listeners could fail to notice such question dodging? We suggest that dodgers mask their deception by exploiting implicit norms that direct listeners’ attention away from detecting whether a particular answer truly addresses the specific question asked. The title of our article is taken from the Dickens character, the Artful Dodger, who was skillful at distracting the attention of his victims with conversation as he picked their pockets (Dickens, 1838/1994); by assuming that friendly conversation implied a lack of guile, his victims made themselves vulnerable to his thievery. Indeed, Grice’s (1989) theory of conversational implicature posits that listeners make assumptions about the good faith cooperation of speakers. His “Cooperative Principle” has four constituent maxims: Communication will (a) contain the appropriate *quantity* of information; (b) be of truthful *quality*; (c) be delivered in an appropriate *manner*; and, most crucial to the present investigation, (d) will be *relevant* to the topic at hand. Deceptive communication, in this view, is communication that violates any of these maxims (see also Burgoon, Buller, Guerrero,

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Affi, & Feldman, 1996; McCornack, 1992). In support of this theory, previous research has demonstrated that speakers prompted to generate deceptive communication do in fact construct messages that violate these maxims, listeners rate deceptive communication as violating these maxims to a greater degree than truthful communication, and listeners rate communication that violates these maxims as more deceptive and less honest (Buller & Burgoon, 1996; McCornack, Levine, Torres, Solowczuk, & Campbell, 1992; Yeung, Levine, & Nishiyama, 1999).

Whereas previous research has focused on how speakers violate Gricean norms when producing deceptive communications, we focus on a different implication of those norms. Because listeners assume that speakers generally abide by such norms, speakers may be given the benefit of the doubt when they adhere closely enough to conversational norms (Burgoon, Blair, & Strom, 2008; Clark & Clark, 1977; O'Sullivan, 2003). Furthermore, whereas previous research has demonstrated that egregious violations of conversational norms are likely to be detected, we suggest that the same norms allow speakers to push the boundaries of communication: When speakers answer a question that is similar enough to the question asked, listeners may fail to notice that the answer offered is, in fact, irrelevant. In line with previous research, however, we do suggest that when speakers stray too far—answering questions that are egregiously dissimilar—listeners are likely to notice.

Why might listeners be susceptible to dodging? We suggest that the competing goals of listeners coupled with the limited nature of their attentional capacity contribute to the failure to detect dodges. First, a large body of research has documented the limited capacity of attention, such that orienting toward one stimulus degrades attention toward others (Cherry, 1953; Miller, 1956; Posner, 1980); for example, attending to the goal of counting basketball passes made by a group of people can cause viewers to fail to notice a man in a gorilla suit walking through the game (Simons & Chabris, 1999). Although attending to whether a speaker has actually answered a question is clearly an important goal for listeners, it competes with other, often more automatic, goals. In particular, research has suggested that when people encounter someone new, they automatically pursue the social goal of evaluating that person: Do I like this person? Do I trust this person? (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008). Indeed, social interactions can cause people to fail to notice even jarringly incongruous statements, as when people acquiesce to requests ("May I cut in line to make a copy . . .") accompanied by substantively irrelevant "reasons" (" . . . because I need to make a copy?"; Langer, Blank, & Chanowitz, 1978).

Given attentional limitations, we suggest that the automaticity of listeners' social goal of forming an impression of speakers makes them vulnerable to failing to notice when a speaker dodges a question asked by answering a similar question instead. In short, we suggest that when listeners hear a speaker answer a question, their assumption that the speaker will follow norms of cooperative communication makes them vulnerable to failing to notice that the speaker is not answering the question asked, and is instead providing an answer to an altogether different question.

Recall the previously described example: A politician's messaging consultants have advised him to talk about health care in an upcoming debate, regardless of the actual questions asked. Should the politician be asked about health care, his prepared answer about health care will, of course, be a relevant and correct

response. However, should the question be about the illegal drug problem, we suggest that the answer about health care is similar enough that listeners would fail to detect the dodge. Should the question be about the War on Terror, however, that answer would be too dissimilar from the question asked, prompting listeners to detect that the speaker attempted to dodge the question asked. Thus, the *similarity* between the question asked and the question answered is one crucial determinant of dodge detection. But also, as outlined above, answering a similar question should only go unnoticed when listeners' attention is not directed toward dodge detection. We predicted that focusing attention on whether the politician answers the question asked should increase detection of dodge attempts. Thus, the attentional *goal* of the listener was our second proposed key factor in determining dodge detection.

Overview of Experiments

We tested the role of these two factors in four experiments, investigating when dodge attempts will be noticed by listeners, while also exploring the consequences of dodging on listeners' interpersonal perceptions of speakers. In Study 1, participants watched a debate in which a speaker answered the correct question or answered a similar question. We also varied the listeners' goals (social evaluation vs. dodge detection) to examine the impact of goals on dodge detection. In Study 2, participants listened to a debate in which a speaker answered the correct question, answered a similar question, or answered a dissimilar question. We assessed the impact of similarity on dodge detection, as well as the impact of successful and unsuccessful question dodges on listeners' social evaluation of the speaker. In Study 3, we included a condition in which the speaker answered the correct question but in a disfluent manner, exploring whether answering a similar question well might be perceived more positively than answering the correct question poorly. Finally, in Study 4, we explored a practical intervention to increase the likelihood of dodge detection—making the question asked more salient—that shifts listeners' attention toward dodge detection goals.

Study 1: Goals, Attention, and Successful Dodges

In Study 1, we explored how social goals contribute to listeners' failure to detect question dodging. Participants watched an excerpt of a debate in which a speaker answered the correct question (the question he was asked) or a similar question (a topically related question), and they were later asked to identify what question the speaker had been asked. We expected that participants who viewed a speaker answering a similar question would frequently fail to realize that the speaker did not answer the question he had been asked. Most important for our account, we predicted that the goal that participants brought to viewing the debate would impact their likelihood of dodge detection. Some participants were directed to attend to how they socially evaluated the speaker (*social goal*), some were directed to attend to whether the speaker answered the question he was asked (*detection goal*), and others were given no specific guidance (*no goal*). We expected that the social-goal and no-goal conditions would result in the same low rates of dodge detection, suggesting that participants' default goal under the no-goal condition was, in fact, social evaluation.

We also expected, however, that diverting attention from the default social goal toward whether the speaker answered the question asked would increase dodge detection, suggesting that limited attention is one of the causes of listeners' failure to detect dodges. We had two specific hypotheses. First,

Hypothesis 1: Overall, recall of the question asked will be lower when speakers answer a similar question relative to when speakers answer the correct question.

Reflecting the role of attention, our second hypothesis was that the following:

Hypothesis 2: Listeners directed to attend to whether the speaker answered the question asked will exhibit increased dodge detection compared with listeners directed to attend to either a social goal or no specific goal.

Method

Participants. Listeners ($N = 333$, 70% women, $M_{\text{age}} = 47.1$ years, $SD = 23.2$) completed the study online. They were recruited using an online survey company that compensated participants with an online currency worth less than \$8.

Procedure. In this study, each participant watched a 4-min clip of a mock political debate designed to simulate an actual televised debate (Norton & Goethals, 2004). Participants were randomly assigned to one condition of a 3 (goal: none, social, dodge detection) $\times$ 2 (dodge: correct, similar) between-subjects design.

Participants given no goal were told to pay attention because they would be asked questions about the clips afterward. Participants given a social goal were instructed to attend closely to how they felt about the speakers and whether or not they liked the speakers; they were told that they would later be asked about their feelings. Participants given a detection goal were instructed to attend to whether or not the speakers were answering the questions they were asked; they were told they would later be asked about the questions the speakers were asked.

All clips began with a question about education for the first speaker, to which the speaker provided an answer about education. The second speaker was then asked to give his opinion about universal health care or asked to give his opinion about illegal drug use in America. The second speaker's response was always the same, an answer about universal health care (see the Appendix). Thus, participants either heard the second speaker answer the correct question or a similar (but incorrect) question.

After listening to the entire clip, listeners completed two multiple-choice questions recalling the question asked of each speaker. The answer choices were education, health care, the drug problem, or the War on Terror.

Results

Pretest. To establish that the answer to the similar question was indeed recognized as being incorrect, we asked a different group of participants ($n = 48$) to read the second speaker's answer and select which question best fit that answer, given the same four-option multiple-choice question. Fully 94% of listeners identified health care as the question that the second speaker answered, $\chi^2(2) = 78.88$, $p < .001$. Removed from the difficulty of following a live

exchange, these participants experienced little uncertainty as to which question fit the answer they had just read, suggesting that listeners who recalled incorrectly in the results below from the live exchanges were truly forgetting the question the speaker was asked.

Dodge detection. Before addressing the first two hypotheses, we first define what constitutes a successful dodge. Success in question dodging entails listeners being less likely to recall the question asked of a speaker when the speaker answers a different question than when the speaker answers the actual question. In the example discussed above, a successful dodge occurs when the speaker responds to a question about illegal drug use with an answer about health care, and listeners fail to identify that the actual question was about illegal drug use. A dodge is detected, on the other hand, when listeners recall the actual question asked despite the speaker's efforts to dodge it by answering a similar question. We measured dodge detection by assessing whether listeners selected the correct multiple-choice response regarding which question the second speaker was asked. Given that there were only four options, this left listeners with a 25% chance of randomly selecting the correct response. Consistent with recent research (Levine, 2001), we conceptualized dodge detection as occurring on a binary scale (accurately detected or not) as opposed to on a continuous scale.

First, Hypothesis 1 predicted that, overall, recall of the question asked would be lower when speakers answered similar questions compared with when speakers answered the correct question. As expected, listeners who heard the speaker answer a correct question were more accurate at recalling the question asked of the second speaker (85%, $n = 177$) than were listeners who heard the speaker answer a similar question (45%, $n = 156$), $\chi^2(1) = 60.7$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .43$, suggesting that answering a similar question impaired listeners' ability to remember the actual question the speaker was asked. Indeed, although 55% of all listeners offered an incorrect response when the speaker had been asked about illegal drug use, 40% of all listeners offered the specific incorrect response that the speaker had been asked about health care—reflecting that the speaker's strategy of answering a question about illegal drugs with an answer about health care had convinced many listeners that he had actually been asked the question he chose to answer.

Whereas Hypothesis 1 predicted an overall effect of question dodging, Hypothesis 2 made a prediction about the impact of specific goals on dodge detection. Hypothesis 2 predicted that dodge detection would be greater among participants who were asked whether the speaker answered the question asked compared with those who were given the social goal or no goal.

Listeners in the *no-goal-correct* condition were more accurate at recalling the question asked of the second speaker (88%, $n = 51$) than those in the *no-goal-similar* condition (39%, $n = 52$), $\chi^2(1) = 27.4$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .52$. As expected, results for participants given a social goal were strikingly similar: Listeners in the *social-goal-correct* condition were more accurate (78%, $n = 59$) than those in the *social-goal-similar* condition (25%, $n = 49$), $\chi^2(1) = 30.8$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .53$. Confirming Hypothesis 2, there was no significant difference in dodge detection among participants in the no-goal and social-goal conditions when the second speaker answered a similar question, $\chi^2(1) = 2.3$, $p = .10$.

Hypothesis 2 also predicted that when compared with participants with no goal or a social goal, participants with a detection goal would exhibit increased dodge detection when the speaker answered a similar question. As can be seen clearly in Figure 1, the incidence of dodge detection in the similar condition when participants were given a detection goal was significantly higher than detection in both the *no-goal-similar* condition (69% vs. 39%), $\chi^2(1) = 10.1$, $p = .001$, $\phi = .31$, and the *social-goal-similar* condition (69% vs. 25%), $\chi^2(1) = 20.7$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .45$.

Study 2: (Dis)similarity and Dodge Detection

Study 1 explored our first key factor contributing to dodge detection—the goal of the listener—demonstrating that under default social goal conditions, answering a similar question can result in successful question dodging. Although Study 1 began to examine the role of our second key contributor—similarity—in Study 2, we extended the range of similarity, examining how answering a dissimilar question can increase dodge detection. Of the three conditions in Study 2, two were the same as in Study 1: a condition in which the speaker answers the correct question and a condition in which the speaker answers a similar question. We also included a new condition in which the speaker answers an egregiously dissimilar question: In this new condition, the speaker was asked about the War on Terror, but he offered the same answer about universal health care. Thus, we varied whether the speaker answered the correct question (about health care), a similar question (about the illegal drug use problem), or a dissimilar question (about the War on Terror). In Study 2, we used audio excerpts from a mock debate between two speakers, using the same text as in Study 1. We hypothesized the following:

Hypothesis 3: Dodge detection will be greater when speakers answer questions that are highly dissimilar to the actual question asked than when speakers answer questions that are similar to the actual question asked.

In addition, Study 2 explored not just the extent to which listeners detected dodge attempts but the interpersonal ramifications of detecting such dodges. The objective of artful dodgers, of course, is to avoid answering the actual question and to ensure that listeners fail to notice. We predicted that when listeners do notice

that speakers have violated the Gricean norm of relevance, the speaker would suffer interpersonal costs. Hypothesis 3 predicted that listeners would be more likely to detect dodges when the speaker answered a dissimilar question than when the speaker answered a similar question, we predicted the following:

Hypothesis 4: Listeners who hear a speaker dodge a question by answering a dissimilar question will evaluate the speaker more negatively than listeners who hear a speaker dodge a question by answering a similar question.

Method

Participants. Listeners ($N = 243$, 57% women, $M_{\text{age}} = 43.0$ years, $SD = 12.7$) completed the study in a computer lab as part of a larger set of studies in exchange for \$20.

Procedure. Listeners heard an audio excerpt from a mock debate that began with a question about education for the first speaker, to which the speaker provided an answer about education. Listeners were then randomly assigned to one of three conditions in which the question asked of the second speaker was varied; as in Study 1, the second speaker always responded by answering a question about universal health care. Some listeners heard the speaker asked a question about health care (correct condition), some heard the speaker asked about the illegal drug problem (similar condition), and others heard him asked a question about the War on Terror (dissimilar condition), before hearing his answer about health care.

After listening to the entire excerpt, listeners evaluated both speakers on four interpersonal dimensions: how much they trusted him, how much they liked him, how honest he was, and how capable he was, all on 6-point scales (1 = *not at all* to 6 = *very much*). We created a composite index of these items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .95$).

Finally, respondents answered the four-option multiple-choice questions about which question each speaker had been asked, as in Study 1.

Results

Pretest. To confirm that the question about the illegal drug problem was more similar to the health care question than the question about the War on Terror, a separate sample of participants ($n = 48$) rated how similar both the illegal drug problem and the War on Terror were to health care on 7-point scales. As expected, the illegal drug problem was rated as more similar to health care ($M = 4.90$, $SD = 1.56$) than the War on Terror ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 1.62$), $t(47) = 6.14$, $p < .01$, $d = 1.20$.

Dodge detection. Accuracy in recalling the question asked of the second speaker varied across conditions, $\chi^2(2) = 15.13$, $p < .01$, $\phi = .25$. However, listeners who heard the speaker answer the correct question (82%, $n = 82$) and those who heard him answer a dissimilar question about the War on Terror (70%, $n = 74$) were not significantly different in their ability to recall the actual question, $\chi^2(1) = 2.81$, $p = .09$. Thus, speakers' attempts to answer a dissimilar question prompted listeners to notice that dodge; rather than believing that the speaker had actually been asked a question related to the answer he offered (about health care), participants remembered that he had been asked about the War on Terror.

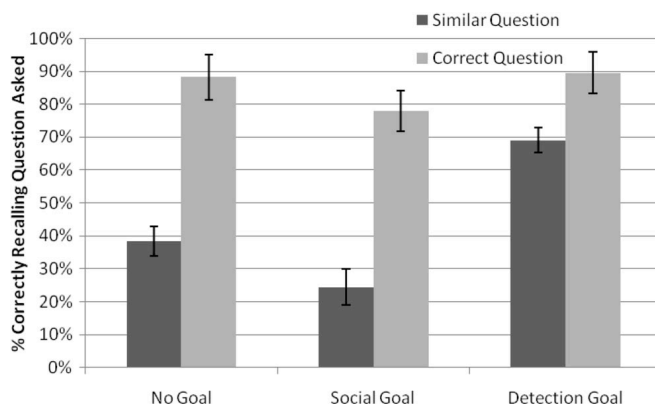


Figure 1. The impact of similarity and goals on recall of correct question (Study 1). Error bars signify one standard error of the mean.

In contrast, as in Study 1, listeners who heard the speaker answer a similar question were significantly worse at recalling the actual question asked: Just 54% did so, lower than both other conditions, $\chi^2(1) > 4.45$, $ps < .04$, $\phi_s > .16$ (see Table 1). Whereas 46% of all listeners offered an incorrect response, 26% of all listeners offered the specific incorrect response that the speaker had been asked about health care, demonstrating that his answer about health care had led them to believe that he had been asked about health care. Replicating Hypothesis 1, answering a similar question resulted in a successful dodge; consistent with Hypothesis 3, dodging the question by answering a dissimilar question resulted in recall on par with when the speaker answered the correct question.

Interpersonal evaluations. Ratings of the second speaker on our composite measure of interpersonal evaluation were impacted by our manipulation, $F(2, 240) = 7.05$, $p < .005$. Supporting Hypothesis 4, listeners who heard the speaker answer a dissimilar question rated him more negatively ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.39$) than those who heard the speaker answer the correct question ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.22$) or a similar question ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.06$), $ts > 2.75$, $ps < .01$, $ds > 1.0$ (see Table 1). It is important to note that evaluations of the speaker who answered the correct question and those of the speaker who answered a similar question did not differ, $t(167) = 1.02$, $p > .31$, suggesting that dodging by answering a similar question can be as effective, in interpersonal terms, as actually answering the correct question. Ratings of the first speaker were not impacted by our manipulations, $F(2, 242) = 0.96$, $p = .38$.

Was the success of the second speaker's dodge related to listeners' interpersonal ratings of him? When the speaker answered a dissimilar question, listeners' ratings were highly and negatively correlated with whether they recalled the actual question (and thus noticed the speaker's unsuccessful dodge attempt), $r(74) = -.49$, $p < .001$; a less-than-artful dodge thus had serious consequences for the would-be dodger. In contrast, no such relationships emerged when the speaker answered the correct question, $r(82) = .11$, $p > .31$, or answered a similar question $r(87) = .08$, $p > .46$. These findings suggest that there are interpersonal costs of unsuccessful dodge attempts, whereas artful dodging can effectively sidestep those costs.

Study 3: Answer the Correct Question Poorly, or Dodge?

The previous studies demonstrated that speakers can get away with dodging a question without being detected and without social cost by answering a similar question. In everyday life, people often attempt to dodge questions when they are not prepared with a good

answer to the question asked—as in the example of politicians stammering through poorly phrased answers to questions for which they are not prepared. Indeed, another of Grice's (1989) conversational norms suggests that listeners expect speakers to offer answers in an appropriate *manner*—one aspect of which is that it not be delivered in an inappropriate style. In Study 2, we compared the efficacy of dodging a question by answering a similar question to bumbling through an answer to the correct question. We expected that providing a well-delivered answer to a similar question would result in lower recall of the question asked than answering the correct question, replicating Hypothesis 1. Moreover, we expected that interpersonal evaluations of speakers who successfully dodged questions by answering a similar question would not be significantly different from evaluations of speakers who answered the correct question, replicating Hypothesis 4. Study 3 tested an additional hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5: Listeners who hear a speaker answer the correct question in a disfluent manner will evaluate the speaker more negatively than listeners who hear a speaker offer a fluent answer to a similar question.

Method

Participants. Listeners ($N = 275$, 56% women, $M_{age} = 39.2$ years, $SD = 15.5$) completed the study online. They were recruited using an online survey company that compensated participants with an online currency worth less than \$8.

Procedure. In this study, listeners were assigned to watch one of three video clips of a mock political debate. The first two conditions used same videos as in Study 1: one in which the second speaker offered an answer to the correct question (which was about health care) and another in which the second speaker offered an answer to a similar question (which was about the illegal drug problem). We created a third condition in which the second speaker offered an answer to the correct question (which was about health care) using the identical text as the other conditions but while fumbling through his answer, adding pauses, "um"s, and "uh"s throughout.

Listeners evaluated both speakers on the same four interpersonal dimensions as in Study 2; we again created a composite index (Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$).

Finally, listeners answered the four-option multiple-choice question about what question both speakers had been asked, as in the previous studies.

Results

Dodge detection. Listeners' ability to identify the question asked of the second speaker was again impacted by our manipulation, $\chi^2(2) = 8.50$, $p < .02$, $\phi_c = .19$. As in study 1, listeners were generally able to identify that the question asked of the second speaker was about health care when he answered the correct question, whether he answered it well (84%, $n = 87$) or poorly (84%, $n = 73$; see Table 2). Recall in both conditions was significantly higher than when he answered a similar question, where just 67% ($n = 83$) recalled the actual question asked, $\chi^2(1) > 5.36$, $ps < .03$, $\phi_s > .18$, again replicating Hypothesis 1.

Table 1
Impact of Similarity on Recall of Correct Question and Interpersonal Ratings (Study 2)

Variable	Condition		
	Correct	Similar	Dissimilar
Mean (SD) interpersonal ratings	3.46 (1.22)	3.28 (1.06)	2.75 (1.39)
Recalling the actual question, %	82	54	70

Table 2
Impact of Similarity and Fluency on Recall of Correct Question and Interpersonal Ratings (Study 3)

Variable	Condition		
	Correct (delivered fluently)	Similar (delivered fluently)	Correct (delivered disfluently)
Mean (<i>SD</i>) interpersonal ratings	3.31 (1.13)	3.24 (1.28)	2.78 (1.12)
Recalling the actual question, %	84	68	84

Whereas 32% of all listeners offered an incorrect response in the similar condition, 24% of all listeners offered the specific incorrect response that the speaker had been asked about health care.

Interpersonal evaluations. Evaluations of the second speaker were impacted by our manipulations, $F(2, 272) = 5.26, p < .01$. Replicating Hypothesis 4, evaluations of the speaker did not differ whether the speaker provided a good answer to the correct question ($M = 3.31, SD = 1.13$) or to a similar question ($M = 3.24, SD = 1.28$), $t(188) = 0.45, p > .65$. Evaluations of the speaker who answered the correct question but did so poorly, however, were significantly lower than both other conditions ($M = 2.78, SD = 1.12$), $ts > 2.51, ps < .02, ds > 0.38$. Thus, supporting Hypothesis 5, speakers who made an effort to answer the correct question—but who did so poorly—were rated less positively than those who made no effort to answer the correct question, instead answering a similar question well (see Table 2). Ratings of the first speaker did not vary by condition, $F(2, 272) = 1.81, p > .16$.

Study 4: A Practical Intervention for Increasing Dodge Detection

Studies 1 through 3 documented some of the underlying causes and social consequences of dodge detection. In Study 4, we tested an intervention that could be used in situations where dodges occur to increase dodge detection: posting the text of the question asked of the speakers on the screen during their answers. Indeed, this strategy has recently been employed by the TV media during some political debates. This intervention also provides a naturalistic example of one of our earlier manipulations; in Study 1, participants provided with a detection goal—those whose attention had been diverted from a social evaluation goal toward evaluating the content of the speaker's answer—showed improved dodge detection. We expected that posting the text on the screen would serve a similar attentional function, shifting their focus from merely evaluating the speaker on social dimensions to reminding listeners to evaluate the relevance of the answer offered, thereby increasing dodge detection. To the extent that participants watching a speaker dodge a question are uncertain as to whether the speaker is in fact dodging, posting the question on the screen—drawing attention to the dodge attempt—should reduce that uncertainty, leading to accurate detection of dodging.

In conditions in which the text of the question did not remain on the screen, we expected to again replicate Hypothesis 1: Listeners who heard the speaker answer a correct question would be more accurate at recalling the actual question asked than listeners who heard the speaker answer a similar question. We also tested one final hypothesis in Study 4:

Hypothesis 6: Listeners who see the text of the question posted on the screen during the speakers' answers will exhibit greater dodge detection than listeners who do not see the text of the question posted on the screen.

Method

Participants. Listeners ($N = 288$, 68% women, $M_{age} = 47.0$ years, $SD = 11.3$) completed the study online. They were recruited using an online survey company that compensated participants with an online currency worth \$8.

Procedure. In this study, listeners watched the same video clips used in Study 1. As in Study 1, all clips began with a question about education for the first speaker, which this speaker answered. Listeners were then randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (dodge: correct, similar) $\times$ 2 (text on screen: absent, present) between-subjects design. As before, listeners either watched the second speaker answer the correct question (about health care) or a similar question (about the illegal drug problem). As in the other studies, the second speaker's response was identical across all condition, always about health care. In addition, some listeners watched the videos with the text of the questions present on the screen during the responses, and others watched with the text absent.

Following the video, participants were redirected to a new screen that did not have either images from the debate or text; as in Study 1, listeners were asked to recall the questions the speakers had been asked using the same four-option multiple-choice questions.

Results

Hypothesis 6 predicted that posting the questions asked of the speakers on the screen while they delivered their answers would increase dodge detection. This was confirmed: Listeners who heard the second speaker answer a different question than the one he was asked were much more likely to recall the actual question asked when the text was posted on the screen (88%, $n = 72$) as opposed to when it was not (39%, $n = 71$), $\chi^2(1) = 35.7, p < .001, \phi = .50$ (see Figure 2). When the questions were absent from the screen, listeners were again more likely to identify the second speaker's actual question when he answered the correct question (85%, $n = 68$) than when he answered a similar question (39%), $\chi^2(1) = 31.0, p < .001, \phi = .47$, replicating Hypothesis 1. Consistent with the above studies, whereas 61% of all listeners who heard the speaker answer the similar question failed to correctly recall the question asked of the second speaker,

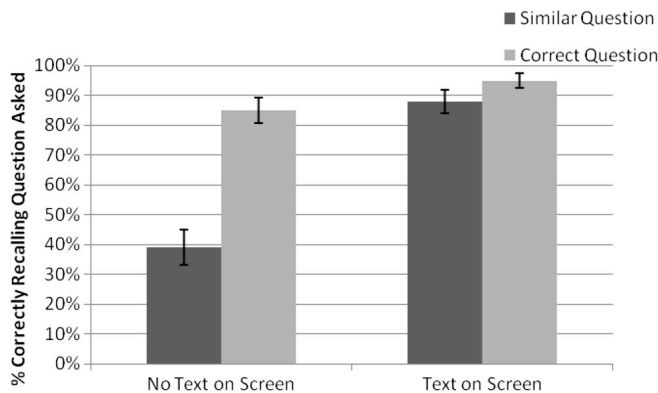


Figure 2. The impact of posting question text on recall of correct question (Study 4). Error bars signify one standard error of the mean.

44% of all listeners in those conditions believed he was asked about health care. When the text was posted on the screen, however, respondents who watched the second speaker answer a similar question were able to recall the actual question (88%) as well as those who watched him answer the correct question (95%, $n = 77$), $\chi^2(1) = 2.4$, $p = .10$.

As predicted, posting the text of the question on the screen—and therefore diverting attention toward dodge detection—significantly decreased the second speaker's ability to successfully dodge questions.

General Discussion

We might expect that when people dodge a question by answering a different question, listeners would both notice the dodge and rate the dodger negatively. To the contrary, we found that listeners engaged in a default goal of socially evaluating speakers did not rate speakers poorly when they dodged a question by answering a similar question—a lack of disapproval that went hand-in-hand with their failure to detect that the speaker had dodged. We proposed, and offered evidence in support of, two key factors in dodge detection: the attentional goal of the listener and the similarity of the answer offered to the actual question asked. We demonstrated the role of goals by showing that when listeners were given a direct goal to attend to the relevance of speakers' answers to the questions they were asked (Study 1), or their attention was drawn to the speaker's answers by posting the text of the question on the screen (Study 4), dodge detection increased. We documented the role of similarity by showing that, although answering a similar question often went undetected (Studies 1, 2, 3, and 4), answering a question that was egregiously dissimilar increased dodge detection (Study 2). Finally, we explored the interpersonal consequences of successful and unsuccessful dodges: Listeners rated speakers who answered a similar question as positively as those who answered the correct question, but they rated those who answered a dissimilar question and those who answered the correct question in a disfluent manner more negatively (Studies 2 and 3).

We focused on two factors that contribute to the failure to detect dodges, but future research should explore other factors that contribute to and moderate the phenomenon.

First, the current studies examined question dodging from the perspective of outside observers—viewers of a televised political debate. In the examples with which we opened the article, however, we noted that question dodging often occurs in more directly interpersonal contexts: between romantic partners or between employers and employees. Future research should explore the extent to which direct interpersonal contact moderates the frequency of dodge detection. One view would suggest that the more interpersonal, the more likely dodges would be detected: An employer is likely more motivated and engaged in obtaining the truth from an employee than a TV viewer causally watching a debate. At the same time, as reviewed in the introduction, interpersonal interactions require a great deal of attention and can lead people to fail to notice even glaringly obvious information (Langer et al., 1978; Simons & Chabris, 1999). As a result, further research is needed to explore the impact of variation in the interpersonal nature of interactions on dodge detection.

Second, individual differences—in both attention and motivation—are likely to influence dodge detection. Given the important role of attention in the failure to detect dodges, it is possible that individual differences in working memory may moderate listeners' susceptibility to dodging (Kane & Engle, 2003). In addition, the inherent motivation of listeners to detect dodges is likely to play a role. For example, we might expect individuals who are more politically engaged to be more likely to detect politicians' efforts to dodge. Although our studies were not designed to test this question, in Study 1, we did assess whether participants had voted in the 2008 presidential election, a proxy for political engagement. It is interesting that a logistic regression revealed no evidence of an interaction between voting and dodge detection, $\text{Wald}(1) = 0.20$, $p > .65$; voters and nonvoters were equally likely to fail to detect dodges. Still, we expect that a finer grained approach to political engagement—for example, measuring people's partisan affiliation and commitment—would impact detection.

Third, we have proposed and offered evidence for a goal-directed attentional mechanism underlying dodge detection, but there are likely other processes that contribute to the failure to notice dodges. In particular, the role of reconstructive memory processes warrants further attention. A large body of research has demonstrated that memories for past events can be strongly influenced by suggestions that such events occurred; people have been shown to misremember events ranging from meeting Bugs Bunny at Disney World to becoming sick after eating particular foods as a child (Bernstein & Loftus, 2009; Loftus, 1997). Our results suggest that people are unable to remember an initial question when a speaker answers a similar question; future research should explore the extent to which speakers' efforts to dodge actually change listeners' memory of the initial question, such that they might actually create a vivid memory of the questioner asking the wrong question.

Our findings offer new insight into the impact of Gricean norms in communication. Whereas much of the previous research in this area has explored whether and how deceptive communication violates these norms (e.g., Burgoon et al., 1996; McCornack, 1992), we explored how listeners' assumptions about the relevance of speakers' answers set the stage for speakers to choose not to answer the actual question they were asked without negative consequences. Our results are consistent with an interpretation that

listeners adopt a default goal of evaluating speakers on social dimensions, and that this default goal leaves listeners susceptible to dodges – although further research is needed to confirm this causal pathway. At the same time, however, we showed that when dodges are detected—as when speakers answer questions that are too dissimilar—listeners rate them more negatively for their attempt to dodge.

From a practical standpoint, we identified several strategies for counteracting these limitations. The results of Study 4, for example, suggest that a practice occasionally used by TV networks during political debates may increase dodge detection among listeners. Indeed, recall of the question when the speaker attempted to dodge by answering a similar question more than doubled, from 39% without the text to 88% with the text. This is not only statistically significant but practically significant. Given concerns that voters are uninformed or misinformed and the many calls for increased education of voters—from politicians and pundits alike—these results suggest that very simple interventions can dramatically increase the extent to which voters are focused on the substance of politicians' answers rather than their personal style (Shenkman, 2007; for discussion of the consequences for public policy of uninformed and misinformed voters, see Caplan, 2007). At the same time, however, we expect that not all question summaries are created equally. The question summaries posted during political debates are often overly vague (i.e., “the economy”), a vagueness that ironically might facilitate question dodging when the question answered is similar to that vague summary but different from the question actually asked.

In many situations, such interventions are unlikely to be feasible. It would undoubtedly be awkward to hold up a sign indicating the specific question you expected an acquaintance to be answering, for example. This is especially unfortunate because the low rates of recall in our experiments are, if anything, overestimates of people's ability to detect dodges. After all, we presented listeners with a forced-choice four-option question—giving them a 25% chance at simply guessing the right answer. Obviously, this forced-choice prompting does not arise naturally in the world. Accordingly, increasing dodge detection in everyday interactions may be no easy task. At the same time, however, we note that although we have focused on the negative aspects of failing to detect dodges, constant monitoring of potential dodges may be undesirable during many interactions. For example, successful dodging may prevent needless social friction in low-consequence interactions, as when someone asks coworkers for their opinion on a new outfit. In addition, dodge detection goals may be particularly harmful when people engage in creative, wide-ranging conversations. Such exchanges are typified by people making connections that are objectively irrelevant to the immediate question at hand (De Bono, 1968). Still, our results suggest that in many cases, dodges cause sought-after and relevant information to go unspoken, with little awareness and few consequences.

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Appendix

Scripts Used in All Studies

Q1: What do you see as the major factors that need to be addressed regarding the American education system?

A1: I'm glad you asked me about this. When I think about America's future there are so many important pressing needs, and education is the root of America's future. When every child in America receives a good education, our country will advance even further to lead the world technologically and productively. The first two factors that need to be addressed are getting the kids to stay in school through motivation and positive role models and ensuring that the time spent in school is not wasted and the curricula in schools are advanced. Too many children are not being motivated to achieve. Instead, they are motivated only to do the minimum. We need to motivate our kids. Teachers should act as mentors and friends, giving students a sense of self-worth and accomplishment. Parents need to encourage their kids to do the best they can and instill values and hard work and achievement in them. Parents and teachers can act as positive role models, but so can other adults that children have access to, people like actors and even politicians. If we demonstrate that working hard pays off, children will be more motivated to stay in school. In terms of the curricula, schools across the country are teaching entirely different things. A child should be able to get the same education across the country. Furthermore, an education should be practical. Students should learn the skills necessary to go on to college or to get a job. We need to make sure that classrooms are productive places and teachers cover material so that our students have the most knowledge possible when they graduate from high school and enter the world.

Q2: What are your main concerns about the way in which Americans receive health care?

Q3: What are your main concerns about the rising drug problem in America?

Q4: (Study 2 only) What are your main concerns regarding the War on Terror?

A2: I am glad you asked me about this. There are so many challenges facing America today. Many of our problems have arisen because too many Americans cannot afford the care that they need. Costs are always increasing and if you do not have insurance, certain necessary procedures can be out of the question. Even if the government were to distribute aid, it would be difficult to determine to whom and how much. As the costs of care rise, it becomes more and more difficult for the government to pay for this care for so many people. Individual costs go up and insurance costs go up. While most employers provide insurance, increased costs will have negative effects on this provision as well, which will undoubtedly lower the number of insured Americans. It seems to me that the primary problem is the cost of health care and we need to address the problem by developing new technologies and processes to lower the costs. Once we have lowered the costs, we can begin to address the larger issues of distribution of aid and revamping the systems that are already in place. However, before we lower the costs, my main concern is that Americans are not receiving the health care that they all need because they are not financially able.