

The Effect of Context On Productivity, Perceived Task Importance, Urgency, and
Difficulty

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Abstract

The purpose of this investigation is to assess whether a particular situational factor can account for differences in productivity and in the nature of productivity. More specifically, this study assessed whether the importance, urgency, and difficulty of tasks attempted differ as a function of situational differences. Bargh, Chen, and Burrows' (1996) argued that priming activates stereotypes which in turn affect people's behavior. The current study randomly assigned participants to a productive or a non-productive role induction, then asked to recount a specific incident relating to their productivity. Task completion as well as the nature of the task itself was assessed. Results revealed that in both conditions participants reported completing the task the vast majority of the time with no significant difference as a function of condition. Participants in the productive condition reported completing more difficult and urgent tasks than those in the non-productive condition. Participants in the non-productive condition reported completing tasks that were more trivial than productive participants.

The Effect of Context On Productivity, Perceived Task Importance, Urgency, and Difficulty

Individual differences in productivity have received a great deal of research attention through investigations of locus of control, delay of gratification, conscientiousness, and need for achievement (Meyerhoff, 2005; Walter et al., 1989; Neal et al., 2012). In addition, the fundamental attribution error suggests that people are likely to over-attribute productivity to person factors and under attribute productivity to situational factors. The purpose of this investigation is to assess whether a particular situational factor also can account for variability in productivity and account for differences in the nature of productivity. More specifically, this study assessed whether the importance, urgency, and difficulty of tasks attempted differed as a function of one situational factor. In this study participants were randomly assigned to a productive role induction or a non-productive role induction and then asked about their productivity.

The idea for this study originated from a personal observation, one that was shared widely among lab co-workers, that when people are busy they are more likely to be able to complete an additional task than when they are not busy. On the surface, this observation appears to be a paradox. People who are not at all busy certainly have more time and resources to complete a task than people whose time and energy are already taxed, so they should be more, not less, likely to complete an additional task. One explanation of this paradox forms the foundation for this study, namely that busy people are enacting a productive (work) role whereas people who are not busy are enacting a non-productive (rest or relaxation) role. Being productive is, according to this explanation, consistent with the work role, but inconsistent with the rest role, so despite

having more resources available, people in the rest role are hypothesized to be less productive because productivity is incompatible with that role.

Social psychology has a long history of investigating the influence of context on productivity, beginning in 1898, when Norman Triplett developed social facilitation theory. Through his study on bicycle races, Triplett found that individuals' performances were enhanced when other people were present. This theory supports the importance of context in understanding productivity. People are influenced by what is going on in their environments, one aspect of which is that those environments influence their productivity.

Long and McGinnis (1981) conducted a study on 668 male biochemists receiving their doctorates during the years of 1957, 1958, 1962, and 1963. Productivity was measured by counts of publications and citations to them. This study found that once an individual had found employment in a specific context, that individual's productivity conformed to the productivity level characteristics of people working in that particular context. Again, this study found that productivity can be explained in part by the environment the person happens to be a part of. This study showed that associations with other people could improve productivity, as they did in Triplett's study, but they could also worsen productivity.

In contrast to earlier theories, Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory maintains that there are different types of motivation, specifically autonomous motivation and controlled motivation. Ryan and Deci (2008) posited that autonomous motivation, an important concept in self-determination theory, is comprised of both intrinsic motivation and the types of extrinsic motivation in which people have identified with an activity's

value in relation to their own sense of self. This perspective suggests that part of productivity can be understood as resulting from the interaction of the self schema and the situation, a point that supports the notion that the role one is enacting at any given moment may influence the extent and nature of one's productivity.

To summarize the main points thus far, there is a research literature documenting that people have stable, internal propensities to be more productive or less productive, meaning that productivity can be explained in part by personality characteristics. There is also a research literature documenting that the context one is also explains differences in productivity. In other words, differences in productivity are also partially explained by the environment. What this study explores is whether one of these environmental or situational variables that affect productivity involves the activation of one or another productivity-related role, a role that is activated based on contextual cues, such as is it Monday or Sunday or am I on vacation? If so, another way to conceptualize at least some context effects on productivity is that contexts may influence productivity through the activation or deactivation of a productivity-relevant self role.

Research consistent with the power of role priming comes from the work of John Bargh and colleagues, who have demonstrated that priming activates stereotypes, which in turn alter people's behavior (Bargh, Chen, and Burrows 1996; Doyen, Klein, Pichon, Cleeremans, 2012). Bargh et al. exposed participants to old-age primes, without their conscious awareness. Compared to control-group participants, these primed participants actually walked more slowly when they exited the laboratory, consistent with the ageist stereotypes activated by the old-age prime. Bargh and Chen (1997) extended these findings. They used a different prime, a racial prime, and again found that when

stereotypes were activated by priming, the targets of those stereotypes then acted in stereotype-consistent ways.

Richard Depue, professor of human development at Cornell University, has provided an explanation for why some people are motivated to pursue goals whereas others are not, and why a person is sometimes motivated to pursue a goal and sometimes not. Depue argued that evidence supports the notion that the brain's dopamine system explains the difference. "When our dopamine system is active, we are more positive, excited, and eager to go after goals and rewards, whether it's food, sex, money, education, or professional achievement," he says. "We have strong evidence that feelings of elation [that occur] because you are moving toward achieving an important goal are biochemically based, though they can be modified by experience" (Blum, 1997, p. 1). This is relevant because it offers a neurological explanation for the process by which the enactment of a productive role improves productivity. The productive role may activate the dopamine system and the non-productive role may de-activate the dopamine system.

Based on the research just reviewed, Hypothesis 1 predicts that participants primed with a productive role prime who were then faced with a task would report completing the task at a higher frequency. Hypothesis 2 predicts that participants primed with a productive role will report taking a shorter amount of time to start the task. Hypothesis 3 predicts that participants primed with a productive role will report choosing a task that is more difficult than participants primed with a non-productive role. I believe that people who have activated a work role will report that they undertook more difficult tasks than those in the non-productive role because completing difficult tasks falls in line with the role they perceive themselves as in. Hypothesis 4 anticipates that participants

primed with a non-productive role will report choosing to complete a task that is more important than participants primed with a productive role. I believe that people who are at rest will be more motivated to act if the task that comes up is highly important because even though their role motivates them not to act, if something really needs to be done they may step out of the role to achieve it. Hypothesis 5 anticipates that participants primed with a non-productive role will report choosing to complete a task that is more urgent than participants primed with a productive role. I believe that people who are at rest will be more motivated to act if the task that comes up is highly urgent because that urgency will place a greater demand on the person to accomplish the task.

Method

Participants

Participants were 146 adults aged 18 and over currently residing in the United States. Participants varied in age from 18 to 62 years. Forty six percent of the sample was female, 52% was male, and 1% was transgendered. Forty nine percent of the sample identified as single when asked about relationship status, 31% were married, 17% were in a committed relationship, and 1% were in an open relationship. When asked about highest education level completed, 2% of participants finished some part of high school, 14% had their high school diploma or GED, 32% finished some part of college, 6% had an associate's degree, 34% had a bachelor's degree, 8% had a master's degree, and 2% had a doctoral degree. As far as sexual orientation, 3% of participants in this sample identified as gay, 1% identified as lesbian, 5% identified as bisexual, 89% identified as heterosexual, 1% identified as asexual, and 1% identified as pansexual. Nine percent of the sample identified as Hispanic, whereas 91% did not. When asked about

race/ethnicity, 5% of the sample identified as Black or African American, 14% identified as Asian, 1% identified as Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, 1% identified as American Indian or Alaskan Native, and 77% identified as White or Caucasian.

A Qualtrics survey was administered via Amazon Mechanical Turk. Participants were compensated \$0.20 for participation in the survey. The survey randomly provided participants with 1 of 2 prompts. One prompt primed participants to envision a day chock full of obligations, then, to imagine some other task getting piled onto their already full plate. This is the productive role. What participants saw was this: “Think of a time in your life when you were really busy. Then some task got piled on to your already full plate. This could be an extra credit assignment, that thank you note you've been meaning to send to your grandmother, dealing with some unjustified parking ticket, or that rescheduled dentist appointment. Were you able to accomplish that task?”

The second prompt primed participants to envision a day with no obligations, one entirely to their leisure. Then, to imagine some task that needed to be accomplished. This is the non-productive role. What participants saw was this: “Think of a time in your life when you had very little to do, when you had the entire day to your leisure. Then some task came up. This could be an extra credit assignment, that thank you note you've been meaning to send to your grandmother, dealing with some unjustified parking ticket, or that rescheduled dentist appointment. Were you able to accomplish that task?” The survey then assessed participants' task completion, the number of hours it took to start the task, task urgency, task triviality, and task difficulty. Participants were also asked to provide a description of the task, to insure that they were referring to an actual situation, not an abstraction, and to provide demographic information.

Results

Hypothesis 1 posited that people primed with the productive role will complete the tasks at a higher frequency than those in the non-productive role. This hypothesis was tested using a chi-squared statistic. In the non-productive condition, 3 participants did not complete the task and 71 participants did complete the task. In the productive condition, 2 participants did not complete the task and 67 participants did complete the task. The results were not significant, $\chi^2(1) = .141, p = .71$.

Hypothesis 2 posited that people primed with the productive condition will take a shorter amount of time to start the task. This was tested using an independent t-test. Participants in the non-productive condition ($M = 2.84, SD = 4.28$) did not differ in amount of time before starting the task from participants in the productive condition ($M = 3.94, SD = 5.18$). The results were not significant, $t(141) = -1.38, p = .23$.

Hypothesis 3 posited that those primed with the productive condition will choose to undertake a more difficult task. This was initially assessed using an independent t-test. The participants in the productive condition chose more difficult tasks ($M = 2.17, SD = .91$) than those in the non-productive condition ($M = 1.67, SD = .73$). The results were significant, $t(140) = -3.65, p < .001$. The hypothesis was supported. Then, a chi-squared test was used because difficulty was measured on a 4-point rating scale and therefore may not be considered a continuous variable, which raises concerns about the statistical conclusion validity of the t-test results. Again, the results were statistically significant, $\chi^2(3) = 12.98, p < .01$, and the hypothesis was supported (see Table 1 for frequencies by condition).

Hypothesis 4 posited that those primed with the non-productive condition will be more likely to undertake an important goal as opposed to a trivial goal. This was initially assessed using an independent t-test. The participants in the non-productive condition chose tasks that were more trivial ($M = 1.77$, $SD = .750$) than those in the productive condition ($M = 1.49$, $SD = .678$). The results were significant, $t(141) = 2.32$, $p < .05$. The hypothesis was not supported. Then, a chi-squared test was used; again because importance was measured on a 4-point rating scale and so may not be considered a continuous variable. The results were not significant, $\chi^2(3) = 6.49$, $p = .09$. Although the chi squared test fell just short of significance, the pattern is the same as the t-test (See Table 2).

Hypothesis 5 posited that people primed with the non-productive condition will choose to undertake more urgent tasks than people primed with the productive condition. This was initially assessed using an independent t-test. The participants in the productive condition chose tasks that were more urgent ($M = 3.22$, $SD = .764$) than those in the non-productive condition ($M = 2.26$, $SD = .741$). The results were significant, $t(141) = -7.63$, $p < .001$, but the hypothesis was not supported. Then, a chi squared test statistic was used because urgency was measured on a 4 point rating scale and may not be considered a continuous variable. Again, the results were significant, $\chi^2(3) = 42.22$, $p < .001$ and the hypothesis was not supported (See Table 3).

Discussion

Productivity has been explained in the literature as resulting from inherent personality characteristics and a person's environment. I sought to determine whether productivity could also be explained by the self-role schemas people activate. Participants

were primed to recall a time in their lives when they were enacting either a productive or non-productive role. I hypothesized that those primed with the productive role would complete subsequent, additional tasks at a higher frequency. This hypothesis was not supported. All but five participants reported completing the task, so the condition had no effect on task completion. This could be because of social desirability bias. Participants may not have been inclined to report on tasks they did not complete.

Next, it was hypothesized that people in the productive role condition would take a shorter amount of time to start the task than people in the non-productive condition. This hypothesis was not supported. There was no effect of condition on number of hours to start the task.

Third, it was hypothesized that those primed with the productive condition would choose to undertake a more difficult task. The group differences were statistically significant and the hypothesis was supported. Participants primed with the productive condition chose tasks that were more difficult than people primed with the non-productive condition. Tasks were rated on a 4-point rating scale ranging from Not Very Difficult to Very Difficult. Participants in the non-productive condition chose tasks that were not very difficult most frequently. Not one participant in the non-productive condition rated their task as very difficult. Those in the productive condition were twice as likely to choose a difficult task than those in the non-productive condition. This may be because when the productive role is activated one fully expects to take on difficult tasks and in turn that expectation may guide subsequent task selection.

Fourth, it was hypothesized that those primed with the non-productive condition would be more likely to undertake an important goal as opposed to a trivial goal. The

reasoning behind this hypothesis was that people who have activated their rest role (non-productive) will only be motivated to act if the task is perceived as important and necessary. The group differences were statistically significant, but the hypothesis was not supported. What was found was the opposite of what was expected. People in the non-productive condition chose tasks that were more trivial than people in the productive condition. This may be explained because trivial tasks may not require as much effort on the participants' part and therefore are easier to accomplish when one is at rest and not inclined to accomplish much at all.

Lastly, it was hypothesized that people primed with the non-productive condition would choose to undertake more urgent tasks than people primed with the productive condition. The reasoning behind this assumption was that when people are at rest they will be more motivated to act if the task itself has consequences if not completed immediately or in the near future. The groups differed significantly, but the hypothesis was not supported. I thought that people who were at rest would be less willing to complete *any* task. Therefore, only a task that they perceived as extremely urgent would motivate them to abandon their non-productive role. However, people in the productive condition chose tasks that were more urgent, contrary to my hypothesis. Urgency was measured on a 4 point rating scale ranging from Not Very Urgent to Very Urgent. Only participants who are at rest (8) did tasks that were Not Very Urgent. Not one participant in the productive condition chose the Not Very Urgent task. The Very Urgent task was selected by 5 non-productive and 29 productive participants. Perhaps simply activating the non-productive role motivated participants to perceive the task as less urgent, which would allow them to remain in their non-productive role.

Limitations and Future Directions

One limitation of this study is that participants almost exclusively reported completing the tasks. Initially, this may be because when primed to recall the activation of either a productive or non-productive role, completed tasks may be more salient than non-completed tasks. Given that the Zeigarnik effect established that people remember uncompleted tasks more readily than completed tasks, this finding may not be a memory effect. A future study may remedy this by bringing participants into the lab and having them complete a task before the researcher so that recollection is not needed.

A second limitation is that the study relied solely on self-report measures. Various biases affect the validity and generalizability of self-report measures including but not limited to exaggeration of responses, inaccurate memory of events, forgetfulness, answers biased toward the person's emotions at the given time, and systematic differences between the people who chose to respond and those who did not.

A third limitation is that the study was retrospective in nature. Participants' memories may be distorted. A study examining this effect in real time is needed to resolve each of these last two limitations.

One more limitation is participants may not have been completely truthful as a result of social desirability bias. Participants may have answered in a manner they perceived others would view more favorably, which includes the completion of tasks. A future study containing a measure of social desirability would help to correct this limitation, as would a study in which participants are observed directly by investigators.

One future direction for this research is to conduct another experiment, but one in which I manipulate the productive and non-productive roles in the lab, then add a task

and assess the same variables in order to get an accurate assessment in real time, instead of relying on retrospective self-reports.

Future Implications

Although the literature has established context effects and personality effects on productivity, what this study shows is that context effects may operate through schemas people activate at a given time. Whichever schema is activated in people's lives has a significant impact on the type of tasks they attend to.

People seem to get more things accomplished when they place themselves in a context where they activate a productive role. This can be utilized to help make people more productive when it comes to work or school.

A host of different context effects can potentially be understood by whether or not a person activates these roles or schemas.

Another clear point this study shows is trivial tasks are the least likely ones to be accomplished. Therefore, if people are troubled with the idea of engaging in tasks of trivial importance, placing those people in a work role context may be able to solve that problem.

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*Table 1:**Frequency distribution and relative frequencies of difficulty in relation to productivity and non-productivity.*

Condition	Difficulty				Total
	Not Very Difficult	Somewhat Difficult	Difficult	Very Difficult	
Non-productive	35	27	11	0	73
Productive	18	26	20	5	69
Total	53	53	31	5	142

*Table 2:**Frequency distribution and relative frequencies of triviality in relation to productivity and non-productivity.*

Condition	Triviality				Total
	Not Very Trivial	Somewhat Trivial	Trivial	Very Trivial	
Non-productive	30	32	11	1	74
Productive	42	20	7	0	69
Total	72	52	18	1	143

*Table 3:**Frequency distribution and relative frequencies of urgency in relation to productivity and non-productivity.*

Condition	Urgency				Total
	Not Very Urgent	Somewhat Urgent	Urgent	Very Urgent	
Non-productive	8	44	17	5	74
Productive	0	14	26	29	69
Total	8	58	43	54	143

Appendix A
The Productive Condition

Appendix A: Informed Consent Form (Group 1)

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study. **Purpose:** To investigate which context is most conducive to productivity.

What you will be asked to do: You will be asked to recall a situation in which you were really busy. Then another task came up that needs to be completed. You will then be asked to describe that task, whether or not you actually completed it, and how long it took you to begin that task.

Time Required: 10 minutes.

Risks and Benefits: There is minimal risk that the security of any online data can be compromised; however no identifying information will be collected and Amazon also uses a Secure Sockets Layer (SSL), which is used to encrypt the data. Also, all of your data will be removed upon completion of the survey. For more information on Amazon's privacy policy and security statement, please see <https://www.mturk.com/mturk/privacynotice>. The survey and consenting is being done via Qualtrics, external to MTURK, which also protects the anonymity of your responses. There are no direct benefits for participating in the study.

Compensation: You will receive compensation of twenty cents for completing the survey via Amazon Mechanical Turk. Twenty cents will be automatically credited to your Amazon account upon completion of the survey.

Right to Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may withdraw your consent to participate at any time without penalty.

Confidentiality: Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. All of the questions will be assessed online and no identifying information will be connected with your responses. Not even the researchers conducting this study will know what your responses are.

Questions: If you have any questions about this research, please contact Casey Fiume at caseyfiume@gmail.com or the supervisor, Dr. Heesacker at (352) 273-2136. Questions about your rights as a research participant may be directed to the IRB02 office, University of Florida, PO Box 112250; (352) 392-0433.

By clicking below, you agree that you have read the procedure describe above and voluntarily agree to participate in the study.

Think of a time in your life when you were **really busy**. Then some task got piled on to your already full plate. This could be an extra credit assignment, that thank you note you've been meaning to send to your grandmother, dealing with some unjustified parking ticket, or that rescheduled dentist appointment.

Were you able to accomplish that task?

From the minute you realized you had to accomplish the task, how many HOURS did it take you to START the task?

Please describe the task.

Q12



How **urgent** was this task?

	Not Urgent At All	Slightly Urgent	Urgent	Extremely Urgent
The task was...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Page Break

Q13



How **trivial** was this task?

	Not Trivial At All (Very Important)	Slightly Trivial	Trivial	Extremely Trivial (Unimportant)
The task was...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Page Break

Q14



How **difficult** was this task?

	Not Difficult At All (Very Easy)	Slightly Difficult	Difficult	Very Difficult
The task was...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Appendix B
The Non-Productive Condition

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form (Group 2)

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study.

Purpose: To investigate which context is most conducive to productivity.

What you will be asked to do: You will be asked to recall a situation in which you were relatively free of obligations. Then a task came up that needs to be completed. You will then be asked to describe that task, whether or not you actually completed it, and how long it took you to begin that task.

Time Required: 10 minutes.

Risks and Benefits: There is minimal risk that the security of any online data can be compromised; however no identifying information will be collected and Amazon also uses a Secure Sockets Layer (SSL), which is used to encrypt the data. Also, all of your data will be removed upon completion of the survey. For more information on Amazon's privacy policy and security statement, please see <https://www.mturk.com/mturk/privacynotice>. The survey and consenting is being done via Qualtrics, external to MTURK, which also protects the anonymity of your responses. There are no direct benefits for participating in the study.

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By clicking below, you agree that you have read the procedure describe above and voluntarily agree to participate in the study.

Think of a time in your life when you had **very little to do, when you had the entire day to your leisure**. Then some task came up. This could be an extra credit assignment, that thank you note you've been meaning to send to your grandmother, dealing with some unjustified parking ticket, or that rescheduled dentist appointment.

Were you able to accomplish that task?

From the minute you realized you had to accomplish the task, how many HOURS did it take you to START the task?

Please describe the task.

Q12

How **urgent** was this task?

 ▾

	Not Urgent At All	Slightly Urgent	Urgent	Extremely Urgent
The task was...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Page Break

Q13

How **trivial** was this task?

 ▾

	Not Trivial At All (Very Important)	Slightly Trivial	Trivial	Extremely Trivial (Unimportant)
The task was...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Page Break

Q14

How **difficult** was this task?

 ▾

	Not Difficult At All (Very Easy)	Slightly Difficult	Difficult	Very Difficult
The task was...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Appendix C Demographics

Q25

 ▼

Please indicate your age.

Q26

 ▼

Please indicate your gender.

- Female
- Male
- Transgender
- Genderqueer
- Other, please specify.

Q27

 ▼

What is your relationship status?

- Single
- Married
- In a committed relationship
- In an open relationship
- Other, please specify.

Q28 **What is your education level?**

- Some high school
- High school diploma/GED
- Some college
- Associate's degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Doctoral degree

Q29 **Please indicate your sexual orientation (check those which apply).**

- Lesbian
- Gay
- Bisexual
- Heterosexual
- Pansexual
- Queer
- Asexual
- Other, please specify.

Q30



Hispanic Origin?

- Yes, I identify as Hispanic.
- No, I do not identify as Hispanic.

Q31



Race/ethnicity (check those which apply).

- Black/African American
- Asian
- White/Caucasian
- Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander
- Persian
- American Indian/Alaskan Native
- Other, please specify.

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Q11



Thank you for your participation in this survey.

MTURK users: please paste this code in the box on MTURK - 1397