CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This study revealed four general findings about the factors that impact the acceptability of a justification, attitudinal reactions, and behaviors. First, the specificity of a justification was found to have a main effect on acceptability. Second, the expert trainer was found to have a greater impact on acceptability under conditions of low involvement than under high involvement. This effect “boomeranged” under high involvement, where the non-expert trainer’s justification was found to be more acceptable than the one offered by the expert. Third, the acceptability of the justification was positively correlated with perceptions of procedural fairness, interactional fairness, distributive fairness (associated with both the assessment and the distributive decision), satisfaction with the trainer and the task, and commitment to the trainer and the task; it was negatively correlated with complaints. Fourth, acceptability of the justification was found to act as a mediator or partial mediator between the effects of the independent variables (i.e., specificity main effect and the simple main effect of expertise under high involvement) and the outcome variables (procedural fairness, interactional fairness, and distributive fairness of the assessment).

The first two sets of findings are discussed below in the section “The Determinates of Justification Acceptability”. The third and fourth sets of findings are discussed in the section, “The Role of Justification Acceptability”.

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The Determinates of Justification Acceptability

The results concerning the determinates of justification acceptability have implications for both the accounts literature and the ELM, and there is clear overlap between the two in terms of this research. Discussion is organized here, however, to focus first on the implications of the study on those issues of primary importance to the accounts literature. This is followed by an extended discussion of the research findings in terms of issues more central to ELM theory and research. These findings were partially consistent with the ELM. The fact that perfect consistency was not obtained raises some issues about the ELM and its relevance for the accounts literature.

The social accounts literature. The results of this study establish the importance of the specificity of the content contained in a justification and demonstrate the complex effects of the expertise of the account provider. These results confirm the findings of Shapiro et al. (1994) that specificity is of primary importance in the use of accounts. Specific accounts were found to be equally effective under either level of involvement and for both the experts and non-experts. These findings suggest that message recipients place a good deal of importance on the content of the accounts in a fairness context. There may be at least two good reasons why this is so.

First, a group-value model of organizational justice suggests that the degree of specificity in a justification is important because it has implications for the participant’s perceptions of self-worth (see Tyler & Lind, 1992 for a discussion of the group-value model). When a trainer attempts to provide specific information about a decision that
affects participants, it reflects the respect or value the trainer has for them. In contrast, a vague explanation may signal low regard for the participants since the trainer exerts little effort to provide a detailed justification.

Second, a preference for specificity in justifications may suggest a deeply held “value” for fairness itself in decision-making. The subjects in this study may have been interested in the content of the justification because they were concerned about the ethical correctness of the trainer’s change in the distributive criterion. Although this study manipulated outcome involvement with the use of monetary incentives (high vs. low), it is possible that the concern about the fairness in decision-making -- or value involvement -- inflated the overall level across both outcome involvement conditions (see Johnson & Eagly, 1989 for a discussion of value involvement).

Although there was no main effect for expertise, the expertise x involvement interaction revealed that expertise has an important effect on justification acceptance. Under conditions of lower involvement, a justification delivered by an expert (when paired with either a specific or vague justification) had a larger impact on justification acceptability than under conditions of high involvement (which is consistent with the ELM). However, there seemed to be a “boomerang” effect with regard to expertise under the high involvement condition. Under conditions of high involvement, there was a significant inverse relationship between expertise and justification acceptance (the non-expert was more influential in gaining justification acceptance under high involvement than the expert). The ELM would predict no relationship between these two variables under
conditions of high involvement. These findings suggest, however, that when participants are highly involved in the outcomes, expertise becomes a liability and the lack of expertise an advantage in terms of account acceptance.

Although this latter finding is not consistent with the ELM, it has important implications for the use of accounts. Within a justice context, recipients of a justification may hold an expert more accountable than a non-expert for any questionable decisions, especially if they are more involved by the decision (as with a loss of outcomes). On the other hand, if they are less involved in the situation, they are more likely to defer to an expert.

It is important to keep in mind that the manipulation of expertise was not independent of the other manipulations. This means that the impact of expertise cannot be stated with confidence. In other words, the effects of expertise may occur only under certain conditions of specificity and involvement. This issue is a caveat for this study. In general, these findings raise several issues for the future study of accounts.

There are at least two issues concerning message factors that need to be addressed. The first issue concerns the primacy of account specificity, particularly as it interacts with participant levels of involvement. It is possible that in situations where fairness is an issue, involvement (i.e., value involvement) may escalate regardless of outcomes, and account specificity will be expected. Second, there may be other account factors that are similarly important too. For example, account recipients may also expect an account to be logical, timely, and personalized when the fairness of events is
questionable. Future research is needed to disentangle the effects of value involvement from outcome involvement in justice situations, and to examine these other factors.

A final issue concerns the liability of expertise under high involvement in a justice context. It remains to be seen if these expertise effects are consistent across different justice situations and when different types of accounts are offered. For example, expertise may become an important factor when the agent attempts to “justify” the decision. The justification attempt by an expert, may cause the recipients to generate strong counterfactuals in preparation for this persuasive attempt, in effect raising the standards of accountability for that expert. In contrast, the non-expert may not raise the defenses of the recipients to the same degree thus lowering the standards of accountability. In addition, the use of a causal account that lessens the agent’s responsibility may cause expertise to become inconsequential. Future research should examine the impact of expertise using different types of accounts (e.g., causal account). Moreover, future research needs to focus on isolating the impact of expertise from these other variables.

As discussed above, the results of this study have clear implications for the study of accounts. Since the ELM was used to generate several of the hypotheses, the results also speak directly to the ELM theory. These implications are discussed below.

**The ELM perspective.** The results of this study offer only partial support for the ELM theory. A significant expertise x involvement interaction was found where expertise was relatively more important under conditions of lower involvement than under high involvement. It was not expected, however, that expertise would become a liability
under high involvement, nor was it expected that justification specificity would have an important impact on acceptability under both levels of involvement.

There are at least three explanations for this failure to fully support the ELM theory. First, the ELM theory may be simply wrong when focusing on specificity as a content factor. Second, there may be some contextual boundaries for the ELM, such as the pay-for-performance situation used in this study. A third explanation for these findings focuses on the issue of involvement and the manner in which it was manipulated. These explanations are discussed in turn below.

The first argument suggests that the ELM does not apply when the “strength” of the message is operationalized as “specificity” of the message [justification]. Typical experimental studies of the ELM manipulate multiple factors to achieve one “strong” and one “weak” argument. As a result, it is unknown what impact single factors might have on message acceptance. When the specificity of a message is isolated, it is possible that it will always have a greater impact on persuasion than peripheral factors such as expertise, regardless of the level of involvement. Furthermore, it is unknown if this pattern will hold true for other content factors. Future studies need to examine additional message (or account) factors to determine if there are differential effects across levels of involvement, or if the impact is consistent like “specificity”.

The second explanation holds that there may be some contextual boundaries for the ELM theory. Most ELM studies have examined student reactions to changes in academic requirements that may or may not affect them. In contrast, this study used a
pay-for-performance context where participant performance was evaluated against a standard. The comparison situation in this latter context may raise the level of involvement independently of the manipulation of outcomes, or it may simply pique the curiosity of participants about their relative ability on the task. Therefore, participants in a pay-for-performance situation may actually demand more specificity in a justification when a distributive criterion is changed, aside from its impact on outcomes.

The first two explanations help explain why specificity had a consistent impact on justification acceptability, but they do not explain why expertise exhibited a boomerang effect under high involvement. The third explanation, which focuses on the absolute levels and manipulation of involvement, helps explain both deviations from the ELM theory.

In this study, a truly “low” level of involvement was not achieved which may have contributed to the complex pattern of results that emerged -- a pattern of results that the ELM has yet to fully explore. During the planning of this experiment, it was expected that a low level of involvement would be difficult to achieve. Participants are often interested and involved in experimental studies of most any kind and performance studies per se may heighten involvement through concerns about their competency. In addition, a change in a distributive criterion used in a study may well increase interest and thus involvement in a study. As presented in the Method chapter, a number of measures were taken to offset the involvement problem. Nevertheless, as noted in the Results chapter, the manipulation checks indicated that a true low level of involvement was not achieved. Therefore, it
would be more accurate to describe the conditions produced by the involvement operationalization as “moderate” and “high” involvement.

It is important to keep in mind that the ELM is a theory that actually speaks to the extreme positions on an elaboration continuum. In other words, central processing predominates at high levels of involvement, whereas peripheral processing predominates at low levels. But when the elaboration likelihood is moderate (as produced by moderate involvement), “the persuasion processes involved likely represent a complex admixture of central-route and peripheral-route processes, with correspondingly complex patterns of effects” (O’Keefe, 1990, p. 98). Therefore, under conditions of moderate involvement one would expect both types of processing to be used, with effects from specificity and expertise. In this study, both specificity and expertise proved to be important factors affecting the acceptability of a justification under “moderate” involvement.

In situations where a justification is warranted, it might be unrealistic to expect very low levels of involvement. Traditionally, social accounts have been aimed at situations involving ethically questionable behavior that results in anger or “moral outrage”. In such situations involvement tends to be high. Therefore, it may be the case that social accounts speak only to conditions of high involvement under the ELM theory. This would certainly explain why participants were more involved than expected in the “lower” involvement condition, and the persistent impact of specificity in this investigation. It does not, however, explain the boomerang effect of expertise under high involvement.
In the high involvement condition, the specificity of the justification demonstrated a positive relationship with justification acceptability as expected. However, a vague justification — when delivered by a non-expert — was not the liability it was expected to be. A post hoc test (performed on the triple order interaction) indicated that it was no less acceptable than either a specific account delivered by the non-expert or the expert trainer ($p > .05$). In contrast, when an expert delivered a vague justification under high involvement, participants found it significantly less acceptable than any other combination under high involvement. It appears as though participants were more likely to “forgive” a non-expert for a vague account, but not an expert, from whom they expected a more specific account.

The liability of expertise under high involvement can partly be explained by the manner in which the justification was delivered. First, only one primary argument was embedded in a justification that differed according to its level of specificity. In contrast, studies of the ELM use multiple arguments to enhance argument strength. Second the justification was delivered verbally (most studies of accounts have relied on written scenarios). These conditions may have suboptimized both the content (only one specific argument embedded in a justification) and the medium (verbal vs. written transmission) needed by the highly involved participants to effectively analyze the message. In retrospect, then, it may not be surprising that high involvement participants under these conditions also considered the expertise of the trainer in their cognitive evaluation of the message. Motivated but unable to fully process the content of the justification, it is
possible that participants also chose expertise as a factor for cognitive elaboration. If so they may have believed that the “expert” trainer should have ensured a more complete and comprehensible explanation for the rule changes and thus held him more accountable for a “good” justification. Or, it is possible that the participants believed the expert (in contrast to the non-expert) should have anticipated and prevented the circumstances requiring the change in the distributive criterion. Either way, the resulting boomerang effect indicates that expertise was integrated into the cognitive counterarguments elicited by the justification. If these arguments are correct, expertise was processed according to the central route under high involvement, which would be consistent with the ELM -- although it includes central processing of contextual factors in addition to message factors.

Finally, the liability of expertise under high involvement in a justice context may point to a boundary condition for the ELM. It also has implications for social accounts research. In a justice context where a justification for questionable decision is expected, recipients are likely to hold the agent responsible until an “acceptable” justification or excuse is delivered. Factors that increase attributions of responsibility, such as expertise in this case, may make the decision or action more difficult to justify, especially if the consequences (outcome involvement) are great. If this is true, it may suggest that experts would be better off delivering a causal account (i.e., an excuse) as opposed to a justification. In contrast, a justification may be effective for a non-expert since they are not held to the same standards of accountability.
The Role of Justification Acceptability

The value of a social account lies in its ability to affect perceptions of fairness, attitudes or behavior. In other words, it must be adequate or acceptable. In general, the accounts literature has demonstrated that adequate explanations are associated with perceptions of fairness, attitudes, and behaviors. Although, most of these studies have assumed that the adequacy of the account mediates the relationship between the delivery of the account and the recipient reactions, only two have formally tested its mediating potential (Bies & Shapiro — study 2, 1987; and Shapiro, 1991). This study tested both the direct effects between justification acceptability and relevant outcome variables, and the mediating potential of a justification. The results from these analyses are discussed below.

Direct effects. The findings in this study generally support past research. Justification acceptability was correlated with several justice perceptions, attitudes towards the task and the trainer, and complaint behavior.

Several studies have demonstrated a correlational relationship between account adequacy and perceptions of procedural fairness (Bies & Shapiro, 1987; 1988; Bies et al., 1988), and interactional fairness (Bies & Moag, 1986; Bies & Shapiro, 1987). The results of this study strongly supported for those findings. In addition, this study extends our knowledge by demonstrating a relationship between justification acceptability and distributive fairness (both assessment and outcome measures).

Some studies have established that the use of adequate accounts reduces anger, and improves attitudes towards the account provider (Bies & Shapiro, 1987; Bies et al.,
This investigation supported those findings by demonstrating a relationship between acceptability and satisfaction with the trainer. In addition, this study showed that an acceptable justification is also associated with participant satisfaction towards the task itself.

The relationship between various forms of justice and commitment have been shown in the organizational justice literature (Cobb and Frey, 1996; Folger and Konovsky, 1989). No similar relationship has been shown to exist with social accounts, however. This study demonstrated that an acceptable justification is associated with greater commitment to the task itself and to the leader (i.e., their willingness to participate again on the same task, and with the same trainer).

Greenberg (1987) demonstrated that unfair treatment coupled with low outcomes increases the likelihood that one might complain. In contrast, Bies et al. (1988) failed to find a significant linkage between account adequacy and complaint behavior. This study, however, demonstrates that an acceptable justification is negatively associated with participant complaints.

Justification acceptability as a mediator. The results of the mediational analysis in this study was generally supportive of findings reported in the accounts literature. Justification acceptability was found to fully or partially mediate the relationship between the effects of the independent variables and several of the outcome variables.

Previous studies that investigated account adequacy as a mediator reported full mediation of the account—interactional fairness relationship (Bies and Shapiro — study
2, 1987), and the relationship between the type of account (selfish vs. altruistic) given and feelings of injustice, disapproval and unforgiveness (Shapiro, 1991). This study was consistent with that research.

The relationship between justification specificity and procedural fairness, distributive fairness (of the assessment), and task commitment was partially mediated by the acceptability of the justification. In addition, the relationship between justification specificity and trainer commitment was fully mediated by acceptability. These findings demonstrate that a specific account leads to perceptions of procedural and distributive fairness, and task commitment at least partly because it increases the acceptability of the account. The fact that it’s mediation was only partial, suggests that a specific account also has a direct influence on these variables, or it is mediated by some other psychological variable. For example, it may be the case that participants valued the fact that the trainer took the time to give a detailed description of why he changed the distributive criterion. In contrast, a participant’s desire to work with a leader in the future (trainer commitment) depends fully on the acceptability of their decisions.

Justification acceptability also demonstrated mediation effects on the relationships between trainer expertise under high involvement and several outcome variables. The relationship between expertise under high involvement with procedural fairness, distributive (assessment) fairness, and interactional fairness was fully mediated by acceptability. These results indicate that the non-expert was perceived to be more fair than the expert under conditions of high involvement in terms of the procedures used, the
distributive decision, and the treatment of the participants because his justification was more acceptable. In other words, the negative impact of expertise on perceptions of fairness occurred because the expert’s justification was less acceptable than the non-expert’s justification.

**Implications for Management**

In order to remain competitive or viable today, most organizations must be able to adapt to changing conditions. Many organizations use major strategies such as downsizing, re-engineering, or technology improvements to achieve greater efficiencies or to meet marketplace demands. Some firms must change practices to comply with federal regulations. More commonly, pressure to change originates internally. For example, agents within the organization itself may impose policy or procedural changes to improve organizational performance, or to create a fairer system. Any change, whether big or small, imposed by external or internal sources, must be handled appropriately and fairly if it is to have the intended effects. Since most changes require greater responsibility or flexibility from workers, there will likely be resistance to change efforts. One simple, but effective strategy for attaining acceptance to undesirable events is the use of social accounts (i.e., excuses or justifications). The results from previous research has demonstrated that social accounts are associated with greater perceptions of organizational fairness (e.g., Bies & Moag, 1986; Bies & Shapiro, 1987), commitment (Brockner et al., 1989) and reduced anger (e.g., Weiner et al., 1987).
One particular area in which social accounts are useful concerns changes made to
the systems used for evaluating performance and distributing rewards. For example, the
current emphasis on TQM has required many firms to develop compensation systems that
reward *quality* performance as opposed to *quantity* alone. But, if employees think such
changes will reduce their outcomes, they will likely perceive the decision as unfair, and
will be generally dissatisfied. Under those circumstances, it may be necessary for
management to construct an acceptable justification to mitigate the negative reaction.
The results from this study demonstrated that an acceptable justification is associated with
greater perceptions of organizational fairness, satisfaction, commitment, and fewer
complaints.

It is clear that “good” accounts can lead to positive reactions. But how does one
construct an acceptable account? In this study, it was demonstrated that both the
specificity of a justification and the expertise of the leader responsible for the change are
important factors leading to acceptance. However, the conditions under which these
factors were important differ.

Based on the results of this study and previous research (Shapiro et al., 1994), the
explanation for a change that impacts workers should always be specific. If workers are
highly involved in the decision (e.g., the change threatens outcomes), they will want to
scrutinize the specific reasons behind the decision to ensure that they have been treated
fairly. Even if worker outcomes are not directly impacted by the decision, there will still
be some concern (if current decisions are not implemented justly, then there is no
protection from future adverse decisions). In addition to providing workers' desired information about the decision, a specific explanation may signify that management respects its workers and has nothing to hide from them. In downsizing, for example, the results of this study would suggest that management should be very specific about the criteria they use to pick who stays and why that is important to the survival of the firm. Or when implementing new technology, the results here suggest that management should emphasize specific reasons that clearly demonstrate the superiority of the new system.

The use of expertise is decidedly more complex. It can act either as an asset or a liability, depending upon the level of involvement of those affected and the degree to which they perceive the expert to be responsible for the change. The results from this study suggested that expertise was equally effective as specificity [of the justification] under conditions of lower outcome involvement. But under higher involvement, the expert’s justification was much less acceptable (i.e., a liability) than the one provided by the non-expert. It seems likely that workers who were directly affected by the negative decision were more likely to perceive the expert as responsible for the outcomes -- that he should have known better or prevented the situation from occurring.

These results suggest that if employees are relatively unaffected or uninvolved in the outcomes, it may be a good strategy to use an expert to justify the decision. For example, consider a situation where the procedures for a particular work process are modified by a supervisor. Employees may be upset if they must “learn” the new procedure, especially if it presents any problems. The results from this study suggest that
the justification for the new procedure would be more acceptable if specific reasons are provided. Furthermore, if the supervisor has years of experience with the procedures in question, his justification for it will more-than-likely be more acceptable than a less experienced supervisor, if worker outcomes remain relatively unaffected. But, if workers struggle with the new procedure, where performance suffers and outcomes decline, the “expert” supervisor will likely have a harder time justifying the move than a less experienced supervisor, since (s)he “should have known better”.

It may become more difficult to escape the liability of expertise in situations involving executive level decision-making that results in adverse consequences for employees. When far reaching decisions such as downsizing or re-engineering, are made, the executive officers will more than likely be perceived as “experts” by virtue of their experience, knowledge, and office. Under conditions of lower involvement (e.g., the decision will take place at a distant plant), it might not be a problem. But if the employees at the plant in question are impacted directly, executive officers such as the CEO will be perceived to be responsible and will likely be held accountable (regardless of their relative experience or actual effectiveness). In such a situation, it would probably be an ineffective strategy to “justify” the decision. It may be better for an executive officer to use a specific causal account, which shifts the responsibility for the decision to external factors. For example, a CEO’s explanation for downsizing might provide specific facts that illustrate the intensity of competition, and the poor efficiencies within the firm, all of which required the decision to ensure the firm’s survival.
Caveats

There were several caveats and limitations of this study that need to be discussed. Most of these issues pertained to the manipulations of the independent variables, the context of the study, and limitations of the experimental design.

The first issue concerns the outcome involvement manipulation. As discussed previously, a truly low level of involvement was not achieved, which may have created a greater advantage for the specificity of the justification to have an impact on acceptability under both involvement conditions. It may be the case, that this is a moot point; justice situations may naturally raise the level of involvement for those involved.

But, there may be other contextual issues involved that need to be addressed. For example, this study chose a performance context, in which team productivity would be compared to a standard set by another group. Even though the manipulation of outcomes did produce significant relative differences in motivation to process the account as expected, some might argue that the competitive situation raised the level of intrinsic motivation for all the participants, resulting in a higher level of involvement than desired for the “low” involvement group, and it decreased the range of the involvement treatment. In addition, this “range” may have been further limited by the high involvement manipulation. Deci (1971) argued that when people are extrinsically rewarded (i.e., paid)
for a task they enjoy, intrinsic motivation is reduced. Thus the level of involvement in the high outcome involvement group might have been diminished. ³º

Aside from the motivational issue, the high involvement manipulation in this study does appear relatively weak. Participants in the high outcome involvement condition were told they would have a chance to win a $100.00 cash prize in a lottery drawing after the experiment, but no actual outcomes were manipulated. It is arguable that actual outcomes might have a stronger influence on the dependent variables such as perceptions of fairness. In this study, there were no significant relationships between any of the independent variables and distributive fairness of the outcomes. This may be due to the fact that the outcome was nothing more than a chance to win $100.00. Given more desirable outcomes, distributive fairness of the outcomes might have been affected.

Future studies should address these problems by designing experiments that provide ample range of involvement. As discussed here, a competitive, pay-for-performance context may be fraught with problems regarding levels of involvement. The competition raises the level of involvement for everyone, and the pay may reduce intrinsic motivation. An experimental context that does not raise or lower the levels of

³º It should be noted that Deci’s theory of internal motivation applies to enjoyable tasks, and is thus less relevant here (the catalog task has proven to be quite boring). Never-the-less, it does remain a caveat.
motivation beyond the manipulations might allow for a greater range of involvement, and provide a more complete test of the ELM in a social justice context.

Second (and related to the above issue), the boundary conditions for the ELM in justice situations need to be established. This study suggests that explorations of organizational justice may not pertain to situations where involvement is low. However, as demonstrated here, moderate involvement is obtainable. The ELM does not really address this middle gray area; and it certainly needs to be explored. In addition, there are really too few studies in the accounts literature to make any definitive statements about the applicability of the ELM in this context. Additional social justice experiments and field research using an ELM framework are needed to establish the boundary conditions.

The third issue pertains to the causes of the boomerang effect of expertise. It was reported that the effects of expertise unexpectedly “reversed” in the high involvement condition. As previously discussed, this effect may have resulted from several contextual manipulations that were designed to offset the impact of residual involvement produced by the experimental context. For example, distraction was used during the delivery of the justification to give the peripheral factor (expertise) a better chance to exert influence under the “moderate” involvement condition. In addition, the use of a verbal justification containing one primary argument increased the likelihood that some participants would miss (and perhaps misunderstand) the justification. Open-ended questions and information obtained in the debriefing period, for example, suggested that a few subjects did not quite comprehend the fact that a couple of team members had performed “improperly”. The
overall results of these manipulations may have attenuated the impact of the justification content, and increased the importance of the trainer’s level of expertise under high involvement. In other words, highly involved participants who were frustrated in their attempt to analyze the justification, may have defaulted to using information about the expertise of the trainer. If participants attributed greater responsibility to the expert trainer, then their frustration caused by the lack of easily comprehended account information may have been directed at the expert.

This issue illustrates one of the tradeoffs involved in this design. Petty and his colleagues have always opted to maximize the “strength” of the argument at the expense of precision. By using multiple arguments to enhance or weaken a message, one does not know exactly what elements in the message were responsible. This study addressed this problem by focusing on the specificity of the justification alone. As a result, the size of the effect may have been diminished. Despite this tradeoff, future studies should continue to isolate message content factors, since relatively little is known about the determinates of a “strong” message.

The manipulation of the expert and non-expert condition may also have contributed to the boomerang effect reported in the high involvement condition. These conditions were implemented so that the trainer was “blind” to the manipulation in order to reduce the probability of demand effects. This blind condition, however, required the trainer to play the role “competently” in both the expert and non-expert conditions so that the impact of the “expert” would not be diminished. This manipulation, however, may
have caused the participants to view the non-expert as more qualified than was desired. A
couple of participants expressed in the debriefing period that they felt the non-expert
trainer was “too polished” to be filling in for the absent, expert trainer. This perception
thus may have contributed to the positive reactions to the non-expert under high
involvement. In other words participants gave credit to the non-expert for generally
competent administration of the training session, but did not hold him responsible for the
criterion changes that required a justification (since he wasn’t technically an “expert”, and
could not reasonably have anticipated the events requiring the change). In contrast, the
participants expected competent administration from the expert, and held him responsible
for the criterion change. Future studies ought to address this issue by having the expert
and non-expert trainer actually play their respective roles more realistically. For example,
the non-expert trainer could make some mistakes and subsequently correct them. Of
course, these trainers would need to be blind to the hypotheses and play both roles an
equal number of times to counterbalance personal effects.

The type of “expertise” manipulated may also have been a factor in the
boomerang effect. This study manipulated the experience levels of the trainers. However,
the participants’ perception of expertise in this study was influenced by the interaction of
specificity and involvement, in addition to this experience manipulation. This lack of
independence of the expertise manipulation (a caveat for this study) suggests that there
may be other factors that influence one’s perception of expertise. One such determinate
might be the relative “status” of the person arising from his/her reputation. It may be the
case, that a trainer whose expertise is based on his status or reputation is more trustworthy than one who claims to have a great deal of experience. Since the participants had no experiences with this trainer aside from this experiment, it is unlikely that this type of expertise was perceived. Future studies should address this issue by first identifying the determinates of expertise (e.g., experience or status). Second, studies should manipulate these determinates (status in particular) while controlling the others to assess their impact on the acceptability of a social account.

A fourth issue (related to the above point) concerns the use of assistants to play the role of the experimenter, which can cause demand effects. Four graduate students were trained to play the role in this study. Each “experimenter” was used at least twice, but some were used multiple times. Counterbalancing was not possible due to scheduling conflicts. This was not considered a major problem because the contact time between the experimenter was limited to the introduction and the distribution of the questionnaires. Moreover, there was no evidence to suggest that demand effects had an impact on the results. Never-the-less, future research needs to counterbalance the use of multiple assistants across conditions to minimize this possibility.

A final caveat concerns the validity of the findings reported in this study. Additional laboratory experimentation and field studies will be necessary to establish the generalizability of these results. In addition, future studies need to establish the boundary conditions for the treatment effects, particularly within the context of the ELM.
Implications for Future Research

Given the results of this study and Shapiro et al. (1994), it has been established that the specificity of an account is a primary factor determining its acceptability. Bies et al. (1988) and Shapiro et al. (1994) have also established that the sincerity of the account provider and honesty are important source characteristics affecting the perceived adequacy of an account. This study has extended this knowledge by demonstrating that expertise can also positively (and negatively) affect the acceptance of an account. This boomerang effect for expertise is an interesting and potentially important finding. Future studies are needed to validate this effect and to explore the psychological processes that cause this shift.

Future studies should also address additional content factors (e.g., such as logic, complexity, comprehensibility) and source characteristics (e.g., physical attraction and similarity) that may impact the acceptability of accounts. In addition, there is a growing interest in how social factors impact one’s reaction to complex situations involving potential injustice (Bies, 1994). If social factors do play a role, then it is likely that audience reactions might affect one’s reaction to an account, especially under conditions of low involvement (e.g., Axsom, Yates & Chaiken, 1987).

There is also a need to explore the various facets of involvement. Most studies of the ELM (or accounts) have manipulated involvement (or severity), by varying the degree to which outcomes have instrumental relevance. But, as O’Keefe (1990) has noted, there are probably some facets of involvement that may lead to different results. For example, he
indicated that if involvement is conceptualized as a person’s commitment to a position (i.e., value involvement), greater involvement might very well lead to less attitude change.

Another issue concerns the levels of involvement. In this study, and most ELM studies, two levels of involvement were manipulated. One cannot precisely determine the linear nature of specificity or expertise factors across just two levels of involvement. Future studies need to examine three or more levels of involvement to determine if there are any curvilinear or step functions associated with its interaction with content and peripheral factors.

Related to the above issue is the absolute range of involvement. As noted earlier, a truly low level of involvement was not achieved. Consequently, specificity remained a strong causal factor on justification acceptability under both the moderate and high levels of involvement. Future studies need to manipulate lower levels of involvement (if possible in a justice context) to determine the boundary conditions of message specificity.

Finally, a concerted effort to examine these effects in field research is needed. Most all the evidence generated regarding the ELM has been generated by laboratory experimentation. In contrast, studies of accounts have not neglected field research. However, only two studies to date have examined the three requisite variables (i.e., a measure of involvement, a message factor and a source or peripheral factor) necessary to provide a test of the ELM in a field setting (Brockner et al., 1990; and Shapiro et al., 1994).