



Context matters: Alibi strength varies according to evaluator perspective

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Purpose. The nascent field of alibi evaluation research has produced interesting and inconsistent findings. We focus on a heretofore unexamined variable that may play a critical role in alibi evaluation: context. Specifically, two experiments tested the hypothesis that the same alibi can be evaluated differently when presented in the context of a police investigation vs. criminal trial.

Method. In Study 1, 101 college participants evaluated an alibi in one of three contexts: police investigation, criminal trial, or a control condition devoid of specific legal context. Dependent measures included ratings of alibi strength and credibility, as well as the likelihood that the suspect was guilty. In Study 2, both context and the presence of a corroborating witness were varied in a scenario presented to 139 college participants.

Results. Across studies, an alibi was rated as stronger in the police investigation vs. trial context, consistent with the prediction that the fact that a case has proceeded to trial implies to perceivers that the alibi is relatively weak. In Study 2, an alibi was deemed stronger when corroborated vs. uncorroborated, but this difference was only significant in the police investigation context.

Conclusions. If alibi research is to fulfil its promise for legal and policy implications, a clearer understanding of the variables that influence alibi evaluation must be developed. The present results illustrate the importance of context in this investigation, suggesting that two researchers studying evaluations of the same alibi may arrive at different conclusions based on the simple framing of the experimental task.

Contemporary examinations of false convictions do not reveal their precise frequency, but several common antecedents of such injustices have emerged. This list includes mistaken eyewitnesses, coerced confessions and various investigative short-cuts (e.g. Dwyer, Neufeld, & Scheck, 2001; Wells *et al.*, 1998). Recently, Olson and Wells (2004b) identified another risk factor for false convictions, namely that they are more likely to occur when defendants have alibis that are perceived to be weak. For this reason, alibi

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evaluation is likely to join eyewitness accuracy and false confessions as a research topic that attracts a great deal of attention, for practical as well as theoretical reasons (see Burke & Turtle, 2003).

Indeed, 2004 saw the first symposium devoted to alibi evaluation research at the annual meeting of the American Psychology-Law Society. The papers presented examined a range of topics, including the effects of corroboration (Burke & Turtle, 2004; Culhane & Hosch, 2004a), strength of trial evidence (Shpurik & Meissner, 2004) and previous alibi generation (Olson & Wells, 2004a). These presentations also yielded interesting inconsistencies, as would be expected in any new line of inquiry. Consider, for example, the effects of alibi corroboration. One paper suggested that an uncorroborated alibi is perceived as less believable than one that is corroborated by a familiar other, such as the suspect's brother (Olson & Wells, 2004a). In contrast, another paper reported that corroboration from a close other had no influence on participants' judgments when compared with a no-witness control condition (Culhane & Hosch, 2004a). A third paper presented yet a third conclusion on this topic, indicating that, under some circumstances, corroboration decreases an alibi's perceived strength (Burke & Turtle, 2004).

We believe that some inconsistencies in this developing literature may be accounted for by the fact that researchers have examined alibis in different contexts: of the three papers reviewed above, for example, one instructed participants to assume the role of police detectives (Olson & Wells, 2004a), one utilized a mock juror paradigm (Culhane & Hosch, 2004a) and one made no explicit mention of context (Burke & Turtle, 2004). Continuing to treat alibi context as a factor that can be varied without repercussion – or ignoring it altogether – would be a mistake for this area of research. Alibi evaluation plays a potentially important role in determining the extent to which police investigators focus their attention on a particular suspect, whether prosecutors decide to bring charges and eventually proceed to trial, how a defense attorney prepares a case and how jurors perceive a defendant at trial (see Burke, 2006). As such, alibi research offers relevant conclusions for researchers who study a wide range of legal decision-making processes and also has the potential for important policy implications, such as the identification of risk factors for wrongful convictions and efforts to render such miscarriages of justice less likely (see Burke & Turtle, 2003; Olson & Wells, 2004b). To fulfil this promise, however, it is important first to develop a clearer sense of the variables that affect alibi evaluation. The present research begins one such investigation by testing the hypothesis that an alibi's apparent strength varies according to the perspective adopted by its evaluator. If, as we predict, participants make different judgments in the role of detectives than they do as mock jurors – if, indeed, the context of an alibi conveys information about its veracity or verifiability – then a critical variable will have been identified for consideration by future alibi researchers.

Surveying the alibi literature

Most studies identified through a literature search for 'alibi' were not designed to investigate the factors influencing alibi evaluation. Research has examined the generation of true versus false alibis (Granhag, Strömwall, & Jonsson, 2003; Porter & Yuille, 1996), as well as lay abilities to perceive these differences (Strömwall, Granhag, & Jonsson, 2003) and the extent to which police can detect general deception during suspect interviews (for reviews, see Mann, Vrij, & Bull, 2004; Vrij & Mann, 2001). Other

articles have analysed alibis from real cases, such as Scheffer's (2003) case study of an alibi from a British assault investigation and Kanin's (1994) analysis of how some false rape allegations are generated by complainants' efforts to produce alibis of their own.

A handful of experiments have indirectly considered alibi evaluation while examining other forms of evidence such as eyewitness testimony and DNA analysis (Golding, Stewart, Yozwiak, & Sanchez, 2000; Leippe, 1985; Lindsay, Lim, Mirando, & Cully, 1986). Since these studies did not manipulate any aspect of an alibi other than its presence, their implications for the present investigation are limited to the basic conclusion that alibi evidence can influence jurors (see also Fischer & Fehr, 1985). In studies that have varied alibi strength, alibi evaluation typically remains a secondary consideration. For example, Sargent and Bradfield (2004) tested their hypothesis that White jurors scrutinize evidence more closely when a defendant is Black by presenting participants with trial summaries including strong or weak alibi evidence. As predicted, Whites gave lower guilt ratings in the strong alibi condition, especially when the defendant was Black. McAllister and Bregman (1989) varied the content of alibi witness testimony such that it either identified the defendant or stated that the defendant was not at the scene. Results indicated that jurors underutilized non-identification evidence.

Not until recently were two studies published that directly examined variables affecting alibi perception. In one, Olson and Wells (2004b) proposed a taxonomy of alibi believability. To test their classification system, they asked participants to play the role of a police detective and evaluate a variety of alibi scenarios. Averaging across a physical evidence manipulation – physical evidence was either absent, easy to fabricate or difficult to fabricate – their results indicated that participants were least likely to believe an alibi if no corroborating witness existed. Participants were significantly more likely to believe an alibi when corroboration was available, regardless of whether it was provided by a suspect's brother or a mere acquaintance.

Culhane and Hosch (2004b) conducted a similar study in a mock juror context, varying two aspects of corroboration in a written trial summary: the corroborating witness was described as either the defendant's girlfriend or neighbour, and this witness either gave unambiguous corroborating testimony ('He was with me at the time of the crime'), ambiguous corroborating testimony ('I am not sure if he was with me') or noncorroborating testimony ('He was not with me'). Compared with the conviction rate in a no-witness control condition, unambiguous corroboration from a close other did not have a significant effect on participants' judgments, a finding inconsistent with that of Olson and Wells (2004b). Also in contrast to the Olson and Wells data, alibi evaluation in this study was impacted by the identity of the corroborating witness, as the conviction rate dropped significantly when the corroborator was a mere acquaintance.

The present research

As our review suggests, alibi research is in a nascent stage. One important consideration that has not yet received attention is context. Alibis are evaluated in a variety of contexts, from spur-of-the-moment responses in a police investigation interview to rehearsed testimony on the witness stand. Indeed, of the two published studies concerning alibi perception, one required participants to act as police investigators (Olson & Wells, 2004b) and the other used a mock juror paradigm (Culhane & Hosch, 2004b). Since researchers have not explicitly examined context, we do not know how evaluations of the same alibi may vary by context or whether such differences help account for contradictory results regarding, for example, the effects of corroboration.

The present research was designed to investigate this unexamined, yet potentially critical variable, by determining whether an alibi can be evaluated differently depending on its context. More specifically, we considered the two contexts used by previous alibi researchers, examining evaluations of an alibi when it was presented either in the course of a police investigation or during a criminal trial.

In Study 1 participants were presented with an alibi in the context of a police investigation, a criminal trial or a control condition in which the word 'alibi' was not used. Subsequently, we assessed ratings of alibi strength, alibi credibility and the likelihood that the suspect committed the crime in question. We predicted that participants would expect an alibi to be relatively weak when the case had proceeded to trial in spite of it. In other words, we expected that the mere fact that a case had gone to trial would convey to participants information regarding the strength of the alibi: It would be logical to conclude that the prosecutor must have had extreme confidence regarding the strength of her case if she was willing to press forward with a trial despite the presence of an alibi; it is reasonable to assume that the police must have vetted the alibi in question and found it to be lacking before the trial began. For an alibi in a police investigation context, however, participants were not expected to make such assumptions, as the police would not yet have had the opportunity to investigate the alibi and no decisions about proceeding to trial would have been made to that point. We therefore hypothesized that an alibi presented in a police investigation context would be viewed as stronger and more credible than one presented in a criminal trial context. Study 2 builds on this initial prediction by considering the extent to which context determines the influence of a corroborating witness.

STUDY I

Method

Participants and design

A total of 101 undergraduates in the US participated in order to fulfil a course requirement. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions: *control*, *police investigation* or *criminal trial*. In all conditions, participants read a scenario and answered written questions based on that information.

Stimulus materials

Written instructions asked participants to read the scenario carefully. The following background information was then provided:

Briar Hill High School was recently vandalized by someone who went through the hallways spray painting lockers and breaking trophy cases belonging to the football and swimming teams. The following is a summary of the investigation.

The scenario that followed listed facts in the investigation and described the alibi of James Hilleary, a student under suspicion for the vandalism. Scenario facts included the following: there was no sign of forced entry; only a handful of students had access to the school on weekends; Hilleary was one such student; Hilleary was a member of the swimming team until recent academic probation; some students observed Hilleary laughing during the assembly called to discuss the vandalism. The following information

was presented regarding Hilleary's alibi: when asked about his whereabouts on the night in question, he said he was at a movie with his mother; he could not provide a receipt or ticket stub to verify his story. The alibi was simply presented as a matter of record; no explicit evaluation of the alibi was included in the scenario.

Participants in each condition read identical information with three subtle variations that comprised the manipulation. In the *control* condition, the large-print title of the scenario was simply 'SUMMARY'. The first bullet point of the scenario read, 'There was no sign of forced entry, therefore school officials turned to students who had keys to the front door'. The bullet point introducing the alibi read, 'When asked about his whereabouts on the Saturday night in question, Hilleary said he was at a movie with his mother'.

In the *police investigation* condition, the scenario title was 'POLICE REPORT SUMMARY'. The first bullet point of the scenario read, 'There was no sign of forced entry, therefore *our investigation* turned to students who had keys to the front door' (emphasis added). The bullet point introducing the alibi read, 'When *interrogated* about his whereabouts on the Saturday night in question, Hilleary told *us* he was at a movie with his mother'.

Finally, the *criminal trial* condition scenario was titled 'CRIMINAL TRIAL SUMMARY'. The first bullet point read, 'There was no sign of forced entry, therefore *the police investigation* turned to students who had keys to the front door' (emphasis added). The bullet point introducing the alibi read, 'When *interrogated* about his whereabouts on the Saturday night in question, Hilleary told *police* he was at a movie with his mother'.

In sum, participants were exposed to the same information in all three conditions, but the framing of this information was varied between versions such that it either appeared to be a general summary of a school incident without any legal references, a police investigation summary or a criminal trial summary. Participants responded to written statements using a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 9 (strongly agree). Measures assessed perceptions of alibi strength ('I believe that Hilleary has a strong alibi for where he was on the night in question'), alibi credibility ('I believe that Hilleary's alibi for where he was on the night in question is credible') and likelihood of guilt ('I am very confident that Hilleary was the person responsible for the vandalism'). In the *control* condition, the word 'alibi' was replaced with 'explanation' so as to provide no specific legal context for the scenario.

Results

Table 1 summarizes the findings of all three dependent measures of Study 1. Overall, the alibi was not seen as particularly strong, with an average strength rating of 3.91. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated a significant main effect of context on alibi strength ratings, $F(2, 98) = 4.38, p = .02$. *Post-hoc* analysis using Tukey's HSD test

Table 1. Alibi perceptions by context condition in Study 1

Measure	Control	Police investigation	Criminal trial
Alibi strength	4.27 _a	4.38 _a	3.09 _b
Alibi credibility	4.35 _{ab}	4.81 _a	3.50 _b
Likelihood of guilt	4.19	3.97	4.25

Note. Responses made on scale of 1–9; $N = 101$. Values with different subscript letters differ significantly at $p \leq .05$ via Tukey's HSD test.

($p < .05$) indicated that, as predicted, participants rated the alibi as significantly stronger in the *police investigation* condition ($M = 4.38$) than the *criminal trial* condition ($M = 3.09$). Ratings of alibi strength in the *control* ($M = 4.27$) were significantly higher than those in the *criminal trial* condition; ratings in the *police investigation* and *control* conditions did not differ significantly.

A similar pattern emerged for ratings of alibi credibility. The overall mean for this measure was 4.22. Once again, one-way ANOVA indicated a significant influence of context, $F(2, 98) = 3.60, p = .03$. *Post-hoc* analysis indicated that the alibi was rated as significantly more credible in the *police investigation* condition ($M = 4.81$) than in the *criminal trial* condition ($M = 3.50$). Ratings in the *control* group ($M = 4.35$) did not differ significantly from either of the other two conditions.

No effect was found for ratings of the likelihood that the suspect committed the vandalism, $F(2, 98) < 1$. The overall mean for this measure was 4.14. In sum, the influence of context was limited to ratings of alibi strength and credibility; no effects were found for ratings of the likelihood that the suspect committed the vandalism, even though these estimates were correlated with perceived alibi strength ($r(99) = -.44, p < .001$) and credibility ($r(99) = -.43, p < .001$).

Discussion

This study provides clear evidence that an alibi's context can affect its evaluation. Participants rated the same alibi as stronger and more credible when conveyed in the context of a police investigation as opposed to a criminal trial, a finding that has subsequently been replicated by at least one other researcher (Burke, 2006). Ratings in a control condition - for which no specific contextual information was provided - fell in between those of the other two conditions, although they did not differ significantly from responses in the police investigation condition on any dependent variable. This implies that for the present scenario at least, in the absence of contextual information, participants tended to assume that the materials summarized an investigation of some sort, not a trial. This finding is probably specific to the format of the present scenario, which presented the case as a list of bullet points in chronological order. Such a presentation is more reminiscent of a police report or other investigation than it is the proceedings of a criminal trial.

The manipulation had no significant effect on ratings of the likelihood that the suspect committed the vandalism, a finding consistent with the conclusion of Olson and Wells (2004b) that guilt estimates are not sensitive measures of alibi perception, especially compared with direct assessments of strength and believability. Nonetheless, some researchers have identified circumstances under which alibi manipulations do affect guilt ratings (e.g. Culhane & Hosch, 2004b; Sargent & Bradfield, 2004). Accordingly, it seems advisable to use both direct and indirect measures of alibi perception in future studies until a clearer understanding of the relationship between alibi perception and guilt ratings is established.¹

¹ It is also worth noting that the wording of this measure in the present study could have been confusing to participants, as it asked them to express agreement or disagreement with the statement, 'I am very confident that Hilleary was the person responsible'. Literal-minded participants who were only moderately confident in this proposition could have legitimately provided a response indicating strong disagreement. To remedy this problem, the wording of this measure was changed in Study 2.

Whereas the present results are consistent with the prediction that context influences alibi perception, they do not explain why such effects emerged. We hypothesized that the mere fact that the case had gone to trial would imply to participants in the *criminal trial* condition that the alibi was relatively weak and did not hold up when vetted by police. After all, if the alibi had been strong and confirmable, why would the prosecution have proceeded with the case? This prediction was consistent with the observed results, but other accounts remain possible as well. As one example, asking participants to play the role of jurors could have led them to adopt more stringent criteria for evaluating all case facts, including the alibi. To obtain more direct evidence that the prosecution's willingness to go to trial triggered assumptions about alibi strength and vetting, we presented the *police investigation* and *criminal trial* scenarios to another sample of 27 participants, who were asked to respond to this statement: 'When I read the scenario, I assumed that the police had followed up and investigated Hilleary's alibi'. Participants reading the *criminal trial* scenario agreed more with this statement ($M = 5.64$) than those reading the *police investigation* scenario ($M = 4.31$), $t(25) = 2.20$, $p = .04$. This result does not rule out alternative explanations for the results of Study 1, but it is consistent with the prediction that assumptions about case strength and alibi vetting play some role in the effects of alibi context.

Having demonstrated the potential influence of context, we turned our attention to a variable that has produced inconsistent results in previous research: corroboration. The results of Study 1 suggest that one explanation for varied findings regarding corroboration (e.g. Culhane & Hosch, 2004b; Olson & Wells, 2004b) is that these studies have examined alibis in different contexts. Accordingly, Study 2 tested the hypothesis that context can determine the extent to which corroboration affects alibi perception. Specifically, because many participants appear to assume that an alibi in a case that goes to trial must be relatively weak and not convincing to police, corroboration was expected to be less influential in the trial context than in the police investigation context. In other words, we hypothesized that the effects of corroboration would be stronger in the *police investigation* condition than in the *criminal trial* condition. Such a finding would demonstrate that single-context investigations of alibi perception can produce very different results depending on the specifics of the study materials.

STUDY 2

Method

Participants and design

A total of 139 undergraduates in the US participated in order to fulfil a course requirement. Participants were randomly assigned to one condition of a 2×2 factorial design. One independent variable was alibi context, manipulated as either *police investigation* or *trial summary*. The other independent variable was alibi corroboration, manipulated as either *corroboration absent* or *corroboration present*.

Stimulus materials

Materials were almost identical to those of Study 1. Once again, the scenario described a vandalism case and the alibi of James Hilleary. The context manipulation was again implemented through the title of the scenario and subtle changes in the framing of two

bullet points in the scenario. The corroboration manipulation occurred at the end of the scenario. The *corroboration absent* condition ended with the statement: 'Hilleary could not produce a receipt or ticket stub from the theater to verify his story'. In the *corroboration present* condition, an additional bullet point stated: 'Hilleary's mother confirmed that she was at a movie with her son on the night in question and that he did not leave the house once they arrived home. She also could not provide [us/police] with a receipt or ticket stub to verify the story'.

After reading the scenario, participants were asked to respond to written questions using a scale of 1 (not at all) to 9 (extremely). This marked a slight modification from Study 1, in which participants responded to statements of fact using a scale of 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. The first question assessed alibi strength: 'In your opinion, how strong is Hilleary's alibi for where he was on the Saturday night in question?' Since other researchers have operationalized alibi perception in terms of believability (Olson & Wells, 2004b), we replaced our measure of credibility with the following question: 'To what extent do you believe Hilleary's alibi for where he was on the Saturday night in question?' Participants were then asked a revised, less problematic version of the likelihood of commission question from Study 1: 'How confident are you that Hilleary committed the acts in question?' Finally, in the *corroboration present* condition, we included an additional self-report assessment of the influence of the corroborating witness: 'To what extent did the fact that his mother agreed with his story make Hilleary's alibi more believable?'

Results

Once again, participants did not view the alibi as particularly strong; the average strength rating was 4.04. A two-way ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for context, $F(1, 134) = 25.8, p < .01$ (Table 2 presents cell means for alibi strength, believability and guilt likelihood). As predicted, participants rated the alibi as stronger in the *police investigation* condition ($M = 4.77$) than in the *criminal trial* condition ($M = 3.30$). A main effect for corroboration was also found, $F(1, 134) = 7.73, p < .01$. Participants rated the alibi as stronger in the *corroboration present* ($M = 4.44$) than *corroboration absent* condition ($M = 3.63$). The omnibus interaction was not statistically significant, $F(1, 134) = 2.91, p = .09$, but planned comparisons assessed the influence of corroboration in the two context conditions to test further the prediction that its effects would vary by context. In the *police investigation* condition,

Table 2. Mean ratings for dependent measures by experimental condition in Study 2

Measure	Police investigation		Criminal trial	
	Corroboration absent	Corroboration present	Corroboration absent	Corroboration present
Alibi strength	4.12 _a	5.42 _b	3.15 _c	3.46 _c
Alibi credibility	4.38 _a	5.61 _b	3.74 _c	4.23 _c
Likelihood of guilt	5.50 _a	5.17 _a	5.71 _a	5.83 _a

Note. Responses made on scale of 1–9; $N = 139$. Within *police investigation* and *criminal trial* conditions, values with different subscript letters differ significantly at $p \leq .05$ via planned contrast simple effects tests.

the alibi was rated as significantly stronger in the presence of corroboration ($M = 5.42$) than in its absence ($M = 4.12$), $t(134) = 3.17$, $p < .01$. In the *criminal trial* condition, alibi strength did not vary when corroboration was present ($M = 3.46$) vs. absent ($M = 3.15$), $t(134) < 1$.

Analysis of believability ratings revealed a similar pattern. The average believability rating was 4.49. A two-way ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for context, $F(1, 135) = 15.9$, $p < .01$. As predicted, participants rated the alibi as more believable in the *police investigation* condition ($M = 5.00$) than in the *criminal trial* condition ($M = 3.98$). A main effect for corroboration was also indicated, $F(1, 135) = 11.5$, $p < .01$. Participants rated the alibi as more believable in the *corroboration present* ($M = 4.92$) than the *corroboration absent* condition ($M = 4.06$). The interaction term was not significant, $F(1, 135) = 2.09$, $p = .15$, but planned comparisons examined the separate effects of corroboration in the two context conditions. In the *police investigation* condition, the alibi was rated as significantly more believable when it was corroborated ($M = 5.61$) than when it was not ($M = 4.38$), $t(135) = 3.43$, $p < .01$. In the *criminal trial* condition, believability did not vary when corroboration was present ($M = 4.22$) versus absent ($M = 3.74$), $t(135) = 1.37$, $p = .17$.

As in Study 1, there were no significant effects for ratings of the likelihood that the defendant committed the vandalism. The overall mean for this variable was 5.55. A two-way ANOVA indicated that participants in the *criminal trial* condition ($M = 5.77$) were more confident in the suspect's guilt than those in the *police investigation* condition ($M = 5.33$), although this difference only approached significance, $F(1, 135) = 3.75$, $p = .06$. No main effect for corroboration or interaction between the independent variables was observed, $F_s(1, 135) < 1.04$, *ns*.

The final dependent variable, in which participants were asked to estimate the extent to which corroboration led them to perceive the alibi as more believable, was only included in the *corroboration present* condition. The overall mean was 5.54. An independent samples *t* test indicated a significant effect of context, $t(69) = 3.51$, $p < .001$. Participants rated the corroborating witness as more influential in the *police investigation* condition ($M = 6.42$) than in the *criminal trial* condition ($M = 4.66$), providing direct evidence that the effects of corroboration varied by alibi context.

Discussion

These results replicate the basic finding of Study 1: the same alibi was perceived as stronger when it appeared in the context of a police investigation rather than in a criminal trial. The novel objective of this study was to determine whether alibi context moderates the influence of corroboration. The clearest evidence for this proposition would have been a significant interaction effect, which did not emerge. However to test the possibility that two studies using different alibi contexts could come to different conclusions about the influence of corroboration, planned comparisons of simple effects were also conducted. These analyses revealed different significance levels for the effect of corroboration across alibi context, such that corroboration had a significant impact in the *police investigation* condition but not in the *criminal trial* condition. Clearer statistical support for the role of context was provided by analysis of self-report ratings of the extent to which corroboration affected alibi perceptions. Participants rated the same corroborating witness as more influential in the *police investigation* condition than in the *criminal trial* condition. These findings parallel the divergence in

conclusions of two previous studies, one of which used a police investigation paradigm and reported that corroboration from a close other had a significant effect on alibi evaluation (Olson & Wells, 2004b), the other of which used a criminal trial paradigm and reported no effect of corroboration by a close other (Culhane & Hosch, 2004b).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Alibi evaluation research is a developing field that, in the years to come, will undoubtedly continue to move in practically and theoretically important directions, and may one day shed light on the factors that contribute to wrongful conviction. As with any new line of inquiry, initial studies in this domain have produced provocative and exciting results, while simultaneously generating inconsistencies and new questions for investigation. The present studies demonstrate the fluid nature of alibi evaluation and identify context as a crucial and heretofore unexamined variable in the investigation of alibis. Across two studies, an alibi's context was found to influence evaluations of its strength, credibility and believability. This conclusion is important in the attempt to integrate disparate findings across previous studies of alibi evaluation (both published and unpublished).

We would also suggest that context is informative when interpreting the results of any one of these studies individually. Consider, for example, the following musings of Olson and Wells (2004b):

We find it curious that the condition representing the strongest alibi, which included not only a neutral person corroborating the alibi but also a dated, timed security video capturing a clear image of the suspect nevertheless yielded a mean believability score of only 7.4 (out of a possible 10.0). What type of proof would it take to get a believability score of an 8, 9, or 10? (p. 174)

Analysis of context may help account for this result. As Olson and Wells note, the mere fact that their stimulus materials used the word 'alibi' may have been sufficient to convey to participants some expectation of the suspect's guilt. Instructing participants to play the role of detectives, as Olson and Wells (2004b) did, would have exacerbated this expectation. In other words, simply knowing that someone has been interviewed by police (or even mere exposure to the word 'alibi') is probably sufficient to create some scepticism on the part of an alibi evaluator. Perhaps the only way to 'get' an alibi believability score of 8, 9 or 10 is to present participants with statements taken at random from the population at large regarding whereabouts at a particular date and time. Any additional contextual information may insinuate guilt, leading to a decrease in alibi believability. Of course, the present findings suggest that had Olson and Wells (2004b) used a mock juror paradigm, believability ratings would have been even lower than what they observed. In sum, evaluation context has the potential to both increase and decrease an alibi's perceived strength. Moreover, analysis of context need not be restricted to the two settings - police investigations and criminal trials - considered in this article, as alibis are also evaluated by, among others, laypeople who read media coverage of crimes, judges and attorneys (see Marcon & Meissner, 2006).

We also propose that the importance of evaluation context is by no means limited to the domain of alibi perception. Investigations of eyewitness perception, for example, require participants to evaluate eyewitnesses in criminal trial contexts

(e.g. Bradfield & McQuiston, 2004; Leippe, 1994; Pickel, 1993) as well as investigation settings (e.g. Garrioch & Brimacombe, 2001; Goodman, Batterman-Faunce, Schaaf, & Kenney, 2002; Kebbell & Milne, 1998). These different contexts may be influential. Unlike the exculpatory intent of alibi evidence, eyewitness testimony is often incriminating, implying that evaluation context might have the opposite influence than in the present studies. Specifically, to the extent that participants believe that an eyewitness who testifies at trial has already been vetted by police, they may be likely to view the same witness as more persuasive at trial than in a police investigation. Such a tendency among perceivers would be problematic in light of empirical findings that eyewitness memory deteriorates over time and the vetting process itself serves as a source of potential bias as opposed to a means of ensuring accuracy (e.g. Wells & Bradfield, 1998).

Another advantage of considering evaluation context is that doing so leads researchers to use a wide range of measures and to consider multiple psychological processes. Consider, as an example, the study of racial bias in the legal system. There are numerous legal contexts in which such bias may emerge, including police stations, prosecutors' offices and jury rooms. A complete consideration of the influence of racial bias must include all of these settings and recognize that different contexts require different operationalizations. For instance, examinations of bias at the police level often focus on split-second judgments, such as determinations of whether a target is unarmed or whether to fire at a suspect (e.g. Correll, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2002; Payne, 2001). Examinations at the juror level can include snap judgments of a defendant, but more typically focus on deliberative judgments and attributions (for reviews, see Sommers & Ellsworth, 2001, 2003). By examining racial bias in multiple legal contexts, the practical significance of this body of research has increased, as has its theoretical contribution, with converging results capturing both explicit and implicit processes.

Although the present research marks an important first step in the consideration of alibi context, it is not without its limitations. Perhaps most noteworthy is that the magnitude of the present effects is relatively small, and in the case of Study 2, the most direct test of our hypotheses only approached statistical significance. We note, though, that the context manipulation used in these studies was quite subtle. Had we presented participants in one condition with an official-looking police report and participants in the other with a formatted trial transcript - both conveying the identical facts but using different language and level of detail - we may have observed larger effects for alibi context. The use of a longer written police report in one condition and a trial video in the other would have been an even stronger manipulation. However, these designs would have left us less confident that everything other than context was constant across conditions, thus providing a less rigorous test of our predictions. The present manipulations of context were subtle, yet unambiguously influential. We also note that these experiments were conducted with college participants who might differ from the population at large in important ways. Although other research areas have demonstrated that research conclusions generated from a college student sample largely mimic those found in jury-eligible adults (e.g. Bornstein, 1999; Cutler, Penrod, & Dexter, 1990; Steblay, Besirevic, & Fulero, 1999), it will be important to establish whether that same consistency exists in this new domain.

The present studies also raise additional questions for further investigation. The data demonstrate the influence of context on alibi perception, but they only provide

preliminary conclusions regarding the processes through which these effects occur. Our hypothesis – that the trial context triggers assumptions regarding case strength and alibi vetting – is supported by the small *post-hoc* experiment reported after Study 1. Nonetheless, more direct tests of this prediction are advisable, as is consideration of other potential mediating variables. The absence of significant effects on estimates of guilt likelihood also warrants further analysis. Finally, another methodological consideration is that of external validity. Since this research was designed to explore previous findings obtained using a college sample (Culhane & Hosch, 2004b; Olson & Wells, 2004b), the present use of a paper-and-pencil design and convenience sampling was warranted. Nonetheless, as alluded to above, the field of alibi perception research – and, for that matter, psycholegal research in general – would clearly benefit from additional investigations with representative samples and heightened realism.

In closing, the implications of the present findings for alibi evaluation research are clearly illustrated by a hypothetical case study. Consider two researchers using the same scenario to assess the influence of alibi corroboration. The first researcher uses a police investigation context and arrives at the conclusion that corroboration from a familiar other has a significant impact on alibi evaluation. The second researcher adopts a mock juror paradigm, and her analysis produces no significant, publishable effects. She concludes that corroboration is not influential when the witness has the motivation to lie. In this manner, one research question with one set of materials leads to different outcomes, simply due to the framing of the task. This example and the present data demonstrate that future investigations of alibi perception need to take into account the contexts in which alibis are conveyed; studying police and juror perceptions of alibis are qualitatively different pursuits, and researchers would be wise to treat them as such. We further suggest that evaluation context is also an important consideration for a wide range of research domains, as well as a useful ingredient for creating broad, yet converging bodies of literature on a variety of psycholegal topics.

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