

# Conformity and humor: Group effects on laughter

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## Introduction

Social conformity permeates every aspect of human life including fashion, music, personal convictions, and societal norms. The purpose of this experiment was to replicate and extend the classic conformity experiment by Asch (1951) and apply its principles to humor. The basis of this experiment came from the following question, "Why is a movie often funnier in a theatre full of laughing strangers or when watching it at home with friends or family than when it is watched alone?" According to Khoury (1985), individuals tend to find events funnier in groups. However, it was unclear if one finds an event funny because it is genuinely humorous, or if one is simply conforming to the actions of the others in the group.

## Design

The present experiment used a 2 (report type) x 3 (confederate influence) mixed groups post-test only design. Confederate influence, the first independent variable, was defined as the ratings given by the confederates (silent, high, or low). Report type, the second independent variable, was defined by the two types of ratings the participant gave (an oral and a written rating). The dependent variable was a measure of how humorous the participant found the stimuli as measured by the oral rating and the humor questionnaire.

## Methods

- In condition silent/absent, four participants watched the stimuli at separate viewing stations. After watching the commercials, participants were required to orally rate the stimuli one-on-one with the instructor.
- In condition high/present and low/present, participants were in a room with four confederates. Confederates either acted positively toward the stimuli shown and then rated the stimuli positively, or the opposite.
- In conditions high/present and low/present all seats were assigned. This forced the participant to be at the front of the room, facing away from the confederates. The instructor then assigned participant numbers to the participant and the confederate.
- The participants then watched the recorded commercials and were then called upon to rate the commercials on their humor. The instructor called upon each member at "random" ensuring that the participant was last to orally rate the commercials.
- Following the oral rating, the members participated in a 5 minute thought-listing procedure to allow spacing between the oral report and the humor questionnaire.
- The instructor then had the members complete the humor questionnaire and a general demographics sheet.
- Afterward the instructor then debriefed the participant making sure he/she knew exactly what happened and answering any questions if they had any.

## Discussion

Confirming Asch's 1951 study on conformity and groups, in confederate high and confederate low conditions, a strong significant difference was found, indicating that the participants conformed to the ratings of the confederates. In addition, this study extends upon Asch's research by including the perception of humor as a conformable trait.

While written ratings in high confederate and low confederate conditions were less extreme than their paired oral ratings, evidence of conformity still affected their written ratings, even after the 5 minute thought-listing procedure.

However, the only confederate influence level that showed a near significant difference between oral and written ratings was for the low confederate influence condition. Though the direction of the means for the high confederate influence condition follows the hypothesis, findings did not approach significance. This finding supported Khoury's (1985) statement about events being funnier in groups.

Future research might include extending the scale used to rate stimuli. Result in this adaptation would allow a greater disparity between what is defined as funny and not funny. In addition, more extreme ratings from the confederates could help magnify the effects of conformity as most participants rated the stimuli within the range of ratings given by the confederates.

## References

- Asch, S. (1951). Effects of group pressure upon the modification and distortion of judgments. In H. Gutzkow (Ed.), *Groups, leadership and men* (pp. 177-190). Pittsburgh, PA: Carnegie Press.
- Khoury, R. M. (1985). Norm formation, social conformity, and the confederating function of humor. *Social Behavior and Personality*, 13(2), 159-166.

## Hypotheses

In effort to answer the previously stated question, two hypotheses were formulated:

### Hypothesis One

- Participants will orally rate the stimuli as being more humorous when confederates orally rate the stimuli as funny.
- Participants will rate the stimuli as being less humorous when confederates orally rate the stimuli as not funny.
- Participants will give the stimuli relatively the same oral and written ratings when viewing the stimuli alone.

### Hypothesis Two

- While oral ratings will vary depending on the conditions in hypothesis one, written ratings will remain unaffected by the conformity effect throughout all conditions and will stay relatively the same.

## Participants and Materials

Thirty-six introductory Psychology students participated (10 males and 26 females) with 16 participants in the silent/absent condition, 10 participants in the high/present condition, and 10 participants in the low/present condition. The average age of the participants were 19.4 with a median age of 19.

- Humor was defined by a 10-point Likert scale with 1 being not funny and 10 being extremely funny.
- Materials included five commercials aired during Super Bowl XL which advertise the following: FedEx, MasterCard, Michelob Amber, Hummer, and Sierra Mist.
- Carefully planned scripts for high/present and low/present conditions were provided to all confederates. Materials also included the consent form, the humor questionnaire consisting of five questions, a general demographics sheet, and a debriefing form.
- Apparatus required included a television with a DVD player or a media station capable of playing video, and recordable media with the commercials on it.

## Results

No correlations were found between average humor rating and demographic variables (age, gender, and ethnicity), so no covariates were included.

A 2 (report type) x 3 (confederate influence) mixed ANOVA with unequal N was performed. A significant main effect of confederate influence,  $F(2,33) = 22.19, p < .0001$ , was found, indicating participants were influenced by confederates' high or low ratings. A post-hoc Tukey's HSD for unequal N of confederate influence showed significant signs of participants conformity between confederate high rating  $p < .36$  ( $M = 7.4$ ) and confederate low rating  $p < .001$  ( $M = 3.05$ ), confederate absent  $p < .36$  ( $M = 6.44$ ) and confederate low rating  $p < .001$  ( $M = 3.05$ ), and confederate absent  $p < .001$  ( $M = 6.44$ ) and confederate high rating  $p < .001$  ( $M = 7.4$ ).

A significant interaction between confederate influence and report type was found,  $F(2,33) = 4.48, p < .02$ . There was a significant difference between how participants rated the commercials and which report type they participated in at the time of the rating. A post-hoc Tukey's HSD for unequal N was performed revealing a 2-way interaction  $F(2,33) = 4.48, p < .02$  between the high oral ( $M = 7.7$ ) and high written ( $M = 7.1$ ), and low oral ( $M = 2.5$ ) and low written ( $M = 3.2$ ) levels. A trend was also apparent moving towards significance between low oral ( $M = 2.5$ ) and low written ( $M = 3.2$ ) levels.

