

“It’s not funny if *they’re* laughing”: Self-categorization, social influence, and responses to canned laughter[☆]

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Received 19 August 2002; revised 1 September 2004

Available online 23 November 2004

Abstract

Pre-recorded, or “canned” laughter is often used to encourage audience laughter. Previous research suggests that hearing others laugh can influence an audience, although several variables moderate its effects. We examined an unexplored moderator, hypothesizing that canned laughter would influence listeners only if they believed the laughter came from fellow in-group members. We manipulated the presence or absence of canned laughter in a potentially humorous recording and participants’ beliefs about the in-group or out-group composition of the laughing audience. The results confirmed our hypothesis: participants laughed and smiled more, laughed longer, and rated humorous material more favorably when they heard in-group laughter rather than out-group laughter or no laughter at all.

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Introduction

Both laughter and smiling have long been known to be socially mediated, at least in part (e.g., Freud, 1905/1960; Fugel, 1954; Giles & Oxford, 1970; Hayworth, 1928). We laugh and smile when we hear others doing so (Provine, 1992), particularly friends (Smoski & Bachowski, 2003), and we smile more if we think that we and our friends are watching the same humorous material rather than different material (Fridlund, 1991). This

social mediation of laughter is the basis for influence attempts involving pre-recorded, or “canned” laughter (Cialdini, 1993; Fuller, 1977). Through the use of canned laughter, influencing agents attempt to capitalize on the social nature of laughter to produce audience laughter. In Cialdini’s terms, the laughter of others offers “social proof” (e.g., p. 94) that potentially humorous material is funny. According to Cialdini, people laugh in response to canned laughter because of automatic, non-thinking conformity—simply hearing others laugh leads us to laugh as well. Provine (1996) suggests that laughing in response to others’ laughter may have a biological basis, again suggesting its automatic nature.

Although research broadly supports the effectiveness of canned laughter, the consistency of its effects and reasons why it works remain unclear, if only because several variables can moderate the relationship between canned and audience laughter. For example, once canned laughter is recognized as artificial (so that it no longer offers

[☆] We thank John Hunter, Michelle Ryan, Dick Moreland, and two anonymous reviewers for their critical comments on earlier versions of this manuscript. Ethical permission was granted to conduct this research by the La Trobe University Faculty of Science, Technology, and Engineering Human Ethics Committee (Application FHEC01/R39).

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real social proof), its effects on audiences are weakened (Lawson, Downing, & Cetola, 1998). In this paper, we consider one moderating variable that has not yet been studied, namely the in-group vs. out-group status of the laughing others. Given self-categorization theory's analysis of social influence (Turner, 1987, 1991; Turner & Oakes, 1989), we suggest that an out-group's laughter offers no social proof of funniness at all, and thus should have no effect on audience laughter (and other humor responses).

The effects of laughter by others

Most research on how the laughter of others affects people's own laughter (and other humor-responses) has used broadly similar methods. Participants are presented with a potentially humorous stimulus in the presence or absence of others' laughter. In most studies, the stimulus is an audiotape recording and the laughter is pre-recorded. Using these methods, some researchers have found higher levels of both overt laughter and humor ratings of the stimulus in response to laughter by others (Fuller & Sheehy-Skeffington, 1974; Martin & Gray, 1996; Smyth & Fuller, 1972); some researchers have found higher levels of overt laughter, but no differences in humor ratings (Chapman, 1973; Pistole & Shor, 1979); and at least one researcher has found higher humor ratings, but no overt laughter effect (Porterfield et al., 1988).¹ In two studies, the laughter of live confederates was used (Chapman & Chapman, 1974; Nosanchuk & Lightstone, 1974). Increases in overt laughter in response to hearing others laugh were found in both studies, but humor ratings increased in only one study.

Another kind of research involves the use of cartoons as humorous stimuli. Here, the results are even more variable. Cupchik and Leventhal (1974) found both increased laughter (and smiling) and higher humor ratings in response to pre-recorded laughter in one experiment. In another experiment, overt laughter increased, but humor ratings showed complex interactions among participant gender, trial block, cartoon quality, and self-observation (clearly not an automatic process). Donoghue, McCarrey, and Clément (1983) found no effects of pre-recorded laughter on overt laughter and humor ratings among isolated participants, but pre-recorded laughter did increase overt laughter in the presence of a laughing confederate. Finally, both Vidulich and Bayley (1966) and Brown et al. (1982) found increases in overt laughter in the presence of a mirthful confederate. However, no humor ratings effect was found in the latter study (humor ratings were not collected in the former study). In two other studies, movie footage containing

pre-recorded laughter was used. Increases in both overt laughter and ratings were found in one study (Leventhal & Mace, 1970). In the other study, humor ratings increased, but overt laughter was not measured (Gruner, 1993).

As this brief review suggests, the laughter of others can affect our own laughter and other humor responses. However, there are clearly several moderating variables, some of which are better understood than others. One moderator that has received little theoretical or empirical attention is simply *who* is generating the laughter that is heard. Typically, researchers have made conformity (e.g., Brown, Dixon, & Hudson, 1982; Chapman, 1973; Fuller & Sheehy-Skeffington, 1974; Smyth & Fuller, 1972) or social facilitation (e.g., Chapman, 1976; Chapman & Chapman, 1974; Donoghue et al., 1983) analyses of the psychological processes underlying the effects of canned laughter, or have not considered psychological processes at all (e.g., Vidulich & Bayley, 1966). If the process is (assumed to be) automatic, for cognitive miser (Cialdini, 1993), biological (Provine, 1996), or even psychodynamic (Freud, 1905/1960) reasons, then there is no need to consider who is generating the laughter that is heard. Any influence of laughing others is assumed to occur regardless of who they are. However, research on social influence and persuasion suggests that this assumption may be wrong, because the *source* of influence is often an important determinant of its success (e.g., Petty & Cacioppo, 1981; Turner, 1991).²

A self-categorization analysis of social influence

Self-categorization theory provides an explanation for social influence that emphasizes the social identities of the sources and target of influence (Turner, 1987, 1991; Turner & Oakes, 1989). The theory has been applied to intragroup processes, intergroup relations, and the self (Turner, 1985; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). It assumes that group processes are made possible through the categorization of self as a group member—psychologically interchangeable with others. Self-categorizations vary in their levels of inclusiveness. Given contextual constraints (comparative and normative fit; Oakes, 1987) and the motives and goals of perceivers (readiness), people can categorize themselves broadly, as human beings, or narrowly, as unique individuals, or at intermediate levels of inclusiveness, as group members. These latter self-categorizations make possible all group processes, including social influence (Turner, 1991; Turner & Oakes, 1989).

¹ Lawson et al. (1998, Experiment 1) found a humor ratings effect, but did not measure overt laughter.

² Smoski and Bachorowski (2003) observed differences in laughter when people heard laughter from friends vs. strangers. They did not, however, compare laughter rates to a baseline condition in which no laughter was heard.

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