

# The Effects of Perceived Similarity on Conformity in Non-Humorous Situations

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## ABSTRACT

Forty-one undergraduates were randomly assigned to a similar or dissimilar social group. Each watched a 6-minute video clip and rated it with bi-polar adjectives. They were presented with false data regarding humor ratings that were inflated. The participants re-rated the clip after receiving the false data. Although a repeated measures ANOVA found no effect for the social comparison group, the rating of the video as “humorous” significantly increased after viewing the false data. In post-hoc analyses, additional data was collected on 29 participants in a new condition where the dissimilar group had less credibility than in the first study. In contrast to the first study, we did obtain an effect with perceived social similarity. Conformity was stronger in the condition with the false data from the similar group than it was in the condition with the dissimilar group. Overall, this study confirms that humor is another dimension along which conformity can be induced. In addition, this study suggests that experts interested in reducing conformity should consider diverse comparison groups.

## INTRODUCTION

Laughter is an important part of human daily communication system. When many of us think about laughing we often picture a social situation in which many others are involved. We may laugh at ourselves sometimes, or laugh out loud when we are alone, but mainly laughing takes place when around others. In this sense, we are able to consider laughter as a social signal to others, which takes place in the presence of other individuals (Smoski & Bachorowski, 2003). Laughter serves to express an emotion. In fact, the perception of something as funny or not funny may be affected by the perception of others’ emotions about the situation (Smoski & Bachorowski, 2003). At the very least, research establishes that laughter serves to heighten the pleasure of social relations (Smoski & Bachorowski, 2003).

When presented with a stimulus, individuals have to make a decision about whether or not to perceive the stimulus as funny and whether or not to laugh. There is no right or wrong answer as to if a stimulus is to be perceived as funny or not (Khoury, 1985). Given the lack of set criteria regarding what should be humorous, laughter can serve to persuade others that what one person thinks is funny should also be funny to them (Khoury, 1985). The current study explored the relationship between perceived funniness and conformity with particular emphasis on the role of a similar peer groups’ normative view in perceptions of a stimulus as funny.

Conformity refers to the condition under which individuals change their behavior to go along with a group’s beliefs and/or behavior (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Conformity can be good (stopping at stoplights), bad (looting), or neutral (fads). In addition, individuals’ motives for conformity can traditionally be understood as either informational or normative (Cialdini & Goldstein). The informational social influence theory states that when we are unsure how we should act or respond to a stimulus we tend to copy those around us, in desire to achieve a correct interpretation of how we should act (Cialdini & Goldstein). The current study focused on the normative social influence theory which states that people conform in order for social approval (Cialdini & Goldstein). In social situations humans tend to worry about people rejecting them and we reduce this anxiety by copying what those around them are doing (Giles & Oxford, 1970). In addition to conformity many individuals face situations reflecting needs for compliance. Compliance is a type of conformity which the individual only has to agree publicly with others’ responses but doesn’t have to internalize or actually believe their own response (Nail, MacDonald, & Levy, 2000).

Humor is related to the cohesiveness of social networks. Khoury (1985), states that the function of humor can actually increase social solidarity among members of a group. Lorenz (1966) suggests that laughter or perceived funniness at the same stimulus can produce a bond instantly between group members. By laughing and perceiving

the same things as being funny, this implies that the group members share common ideas and perceptivities on similar issues. It is assumed that if individuals participate in the same activities that others agree with, it will lead to acceptance. Research done by Cialdini and Goldstein (2004) suggests that once someone is accepted by others, this approval allows them to develop and continue their social relationships with others. It is this social approval that then leads to an increase of self esteem among those who are apart of the in-group rather than the out-group (Cialdini & Goldstein).

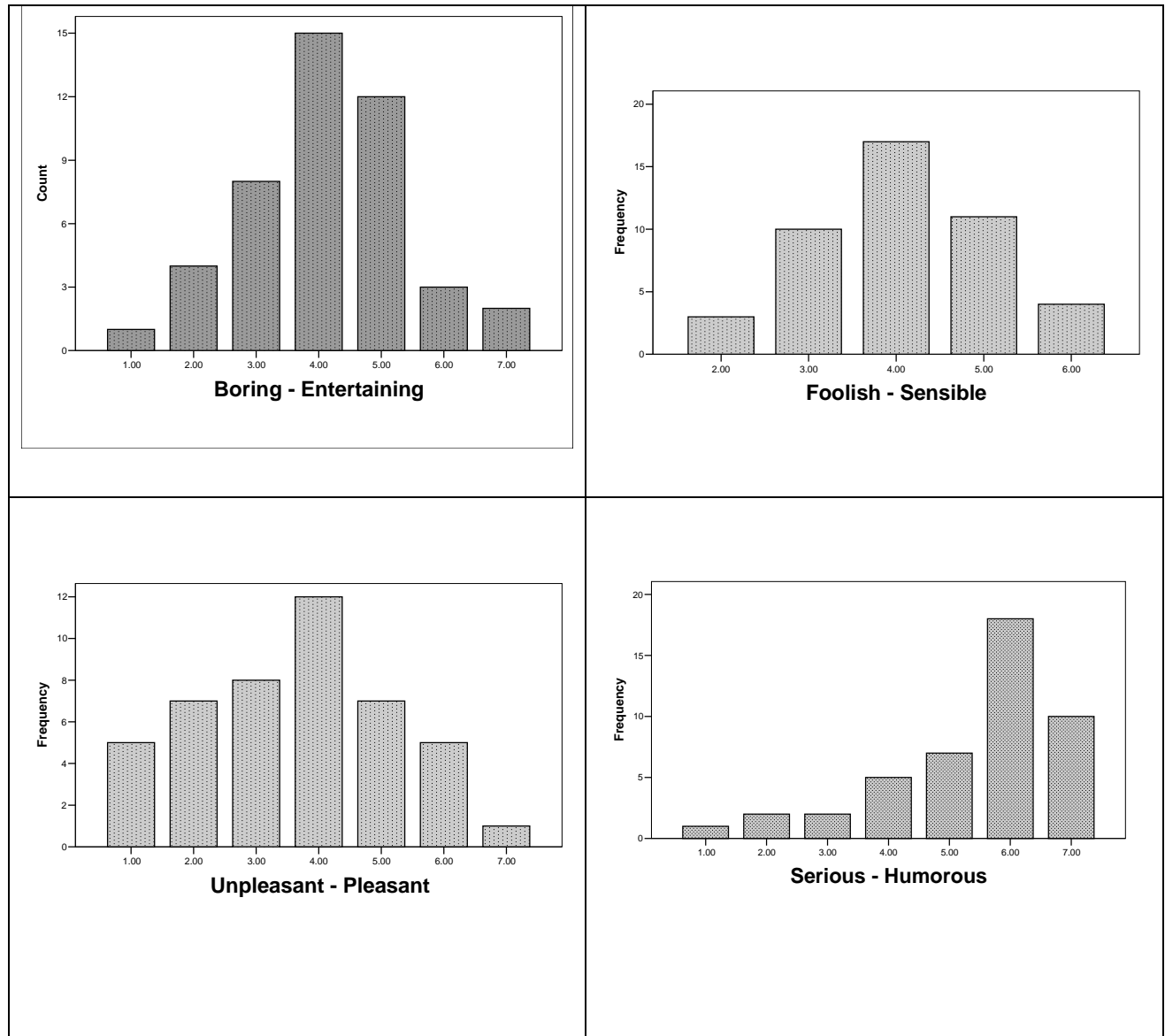
Khoury's (1985) study is a good example of how others' views affect an individual's compliance on perception tasks. Khoury asked participants to estimate the number of coffee beans in a jar by selecting from one of six choices. The data from the participants' guesses were collected and clearly written on the board, in plain view of everyone. Participants were then asked to examine the jar again and make a second guess. These forms were then collected and the results showed that the participants had conformed to the most popular answer. Khoury also had the participants rate the funniness of two different jokes that they were instructed to read. These ratings were also posted on the board in plain view of all the respondents. The results again demonstrated compliance among the respondents; the participants adjusted their responses to match the most popular rating that was publicly displayed on the board from the first set of jokes.

Not only is conformity more likely in public situations, but conformity is also influenced by the degree of perceived similarity among individuals (Abrams, Wetherell, Cochrane, Hogg, & Turner, 1990). Researchers have found that conformity is likely to occur in response to reports of group perceptions even in the absence of interaction among individuals (Burger, Soroka, Gonago, Murphy, & Somervell, 2001). Burger et al. found that conformity increased as the perceived amount of similarity increased among the individuals, even if these similarities are based on fictional attributes, such as common interests and qualities.

In order for a study to genuinely look at conformity in regards to humor, individuals would have to report finding something funny even if they, personally, do not. For this study we used a non-humorous stimuli and the presence of humor appraisals from either a group of individuals perceived to be a peer group or a group with a larger amount of social distance. We hypothesized that participants led to believe that the ratings were from a similar social group would conform more than the participants who were led to believe that the ratings are from a socially distant group.

## METHOD

A total of 41 undergraduate students from a medium sized public Midwestern university received extra credit in their Introductory Psychology course for their participation in this study. The participants were mostly female (86%) and of European American descent between the ages of 18-22 (Mean = 18.94). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions representing either a similar (n= 20) or dissimilar (n=21) social group. Both groups watched a 6-minute video clip from the scientific video "Volcano Above the Clouds: Kilimanjaro, Africa's Tallest Mountain" (Nova, 2003). Participants rated each video with five bi-polar adjective sets on a 7 point Likert scale, including: boring/entertaining, foolish/sensible, unpleasant/pleasant, serious/humorous, and negative/positive. After rating the video clip, participants were provided handouts reflecting bar charts and mean ratings on each of the five dimensions based on the specific group to which they were randomly assigned to (see Figure 1). The false data was based on actual pilot ratings of the video clip but modified for this study. In particular, we showed the "serious/humor" dimension for the video as having a mean rating of 6.20. Both groups were presented with the same false data, but the participants in the "similar" comparison group had data labeled "Introductory Psychology Students 2004"; whereas, the "dissimilar" comparison group data were labeled "former educators." After viewing the data, participants re-watched the video clip and rated it again on the same 5 bi-polar dimensions.

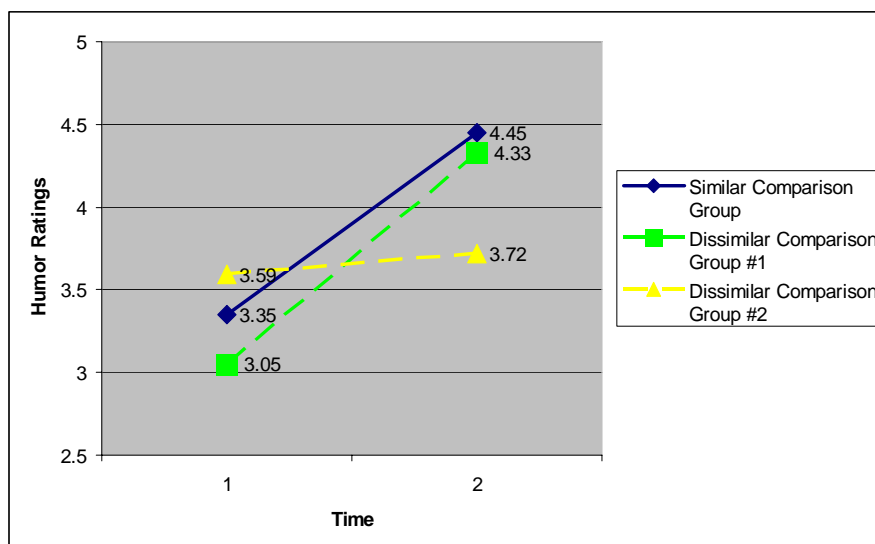


**Figure 1:** Fake data provided to participants regarding previous ratings of the video clip

## RESULTS

Contrary to the hypothesis, a repeated measure ANOVA revealed that the manipulation of similar and dissimilar comparison groups did not significantly effect the rating of the video. However, across both groups the rating of the video as “humorous” significantly increased after viewing the false data. The mean rating of the video at time one was 3.20 while at time two it was 4.39, ( $F(1,40) = 27.70 p. <001$ ).

After reviewing the initial results, we collected additional data to pursue a methodological concern. We felt that the “former educators” group could be perceived as being more knowledgeable about the material, leading the participants to conform to the responses of the “former educators.” The “former educators” group may have been perceived of as experts and created a demand for conformity to expertise (Eagly & Chrvala, 1986). There were a total of 29 undergraduate psychology students who participated in this post hoc study and received one extra credit point for doing so. The same procedure as above was followed with the exception that the participants were shown the same false data with the label of “Juveniles at Alternative School,” rather than “Former Educators.” In the post-hoc analysis, our original hypothesis was supported. Participants receiving data from the dissimilar group showed much less conformity than did those with the similar group data  $F(1,48) = 12.28 p. <001$  (see Figure 2). Table 1 shows the mean scores for each of the three conditions.



**Figure 2** Mean Humor Ratings of the Three Social Groups

Table 1 shows the mean scores for each of the three conditions.

	“Psychology Students” (n=20)	“Former Educators” (n=21)	“Alternative High School Students” (n=29)
Time 1 Ratings			
Mean	3.35 <sub>a</sub>	3.05 <sub>b</sub>	3.59 <sub>c</sub>
SD	1.22	1.12	1.08
Time 2 Ratings			
Mean	<b>4.45<sub>a</sub></b>	4.33 <sub>b</sub>	<b>3.72<sub>c</sub></b>
SD	1.31	1.39	1.03

*Note: The numbers in the same column with the same letter are significantly different. The numbers in the second row highlighted are significantly different.*

## DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to test the hypothesis that participants would conform more to a similar group than a dissimilar group. The hypothesis was supported when the dissimilar group was both dissimilar and unknowledgeable. All of the experimental conditions showed conformity in the direction of a comparison group. It can be inferred from these results that individuals are susceptible to social forces and that humor is another arena where social influence is apparent (Khoury, 1985).

Although we did find significant results, there are some methodological changes we would make if we were to replicate this study. As we progressed through the data collection we became aware of the short time interval between the first and second time that the participants were shown the video clip. We felt that there was a possibility of fatigue effects, and also that participants' responses may have been influenced by other factors such as boredom. We believe that if this study were to be replicated, there should be a mental task between the two administrations of the video clips to reduce the monotonous procedure of viewing the video clips one after the other.

Other factors that may have influenced participants' ratings could have been our reactions and other participants' reactions to the video clip. For example there were a few trails in which some participants laughed out loud while watching the video clip, which could have led to higher humorous ratings by other participants. It is possible that we could have unknowingly affected their responses due to our own body language and/or facial expressions while viewing the clip; however, we did consciously try to control our responses.

Our findings indicate that there is a significant influence on social similarity and levels of conformity. Given that individuals fear rejection in social situations and compensate for this anxiety by imitating those around us (Giles & Oxford, 1970); our finding suggests that we may be particularly motivated to conform to those most like us. Consequently, when applied to broader situations, professionals interested in reducing conformity may wish to increase the diversity of individuals in groups to reduce the similarity. According to our results, by increasing the diversity in a group, it can help eliminate possible negative consequences of conformity, such as participation in illegal behavior. Although conforming to a humorous stimulus may not have serious implications, it is still a social force that people feel obligated to partake in, which reduces their fear of being rejected by the group.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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