2009

Murder Stories and Sex: An Examination of Audience Effect

Sarah L. Buck

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/hucjlm

Part of the Psychology Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/hucjlm/vol47/iss1/1

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Psychology at Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Huron University College Journal of Learning and Motivation by an authorized editor of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact tadam@uwca, wlsadmin@uwca.
Audience effect, the impact witnesses have on the behaviour of an individual, is an area about which little is known. It has been proposed by Matlin and Zajonc (1968) that the effect may be impacted by various stimuli, such as size and demeanour of the audience. It has also been suggested, by Athenstaedt, Haas and Schwab (2004), that the sexes behave differently within same-sex versus mixed-sex groupings. The current study attempts to determine whether audience effect may be impacted by the sex of the participant(s) combined with the sex of an audience. An original method was used, whereby participants were taken on a late-night tour of a darkened church, rumoured to be haunted. Participants were divided into four conditions and responses to specific requests were timed. Results were in the predicted direction; however a two-by-two ANOVA demonstrated no significance. Possible limitations to the current study are discussed.

The presence of other people during an event has a strong impact on an individual’s behaviour. For example, when one sees a stranger in trouble they are most likely to offer help if they are the only other person present. However, if there are others about, each individual is less likely to help someone in need. The audience effect is described by Petri and Govern (2004) as the presence of others creating an arousal mechanism, triggering the dominant response to a situation. When an individual is likely to make the socially correct response the presence of an audience tends to improve their performance. However, if the incorrect response is more probable, the presence of an audience will inhibit or decline the quality of the individual’s performance. An example of the audience effect can be seen in a musician; if the musician practices a piece and
knows it well the dominant response is to perform it correctly. The presence of an audience will likely enhance the performance. On the other hand, if a musician is expected to play a piece they have never seen before the presence of an audience will likely lead to more mistakes being made.

Zajonc, Heingartner and Herman (1969) performed a study with cockroaches in an attempt to demonstrate that dominant responses are increased by the presence of an audience. They divided the cockroaches into alone or social conditions, with the social condition being further divided into co-action and audience. Within each of the four groups were the options of either a runway or a maze task. The results showed that there may be truth to the audience effect theory. Zajonc et. al. (1969) determined that the presence of others must be real, rather than implied or imagined, in order for increased motivation towards the dominant response to occur. They argue that responses obtained from studies of humans can be interpreted as being caused by more than an audience effect. Possible causes include the motivation to succeed, the desire to be praised and avoid blame, and the anticipation of possible social consequences. In other words, the reason an audience affects the performance of a human is due to the response of the audience to the performer. A musician wants the audience to enjoy the piece of music; therefore, if the piece is well prepared, the performer may be anticipating praise and positive social consequences. This anticipation may have a positive impact on the performance, much as the anticipation of negative responses from an audience may have a negative impact on the performance of an unprepared piece.

Further support of the audience effect and its possible causes is given by Matlin and Zajonc (1968). They performed a free-association word task with an observer
(audience) present for either the first or second half of the study time. Participants demonstrated a significant difference in response when they were isolated as opposed to having an observer present. Matlin and Zajonc (1968) argue that an observer is a source of cues; if the audience is small the effects of cues may be stronger. An audience’s reaction is more easily perceived when the audience is smaller, therefore giving the performer clues as to how to act. These clues can also be seen as pressure to conform.

The continuum of social influence, proposed by Petri and Govern (2004), indicates three ways people are influenced by those around them. Conformity, the first of these, is a change in beliefs or behaviours as a result of pressure (real or imagined) from those around an individual. Audience effect can be seen as a type of conformity assuming that the performer is receiving cues from the audience as to how to behave. The other two types of influence are compliance, behaviour change in response to a direct request; and obedience to authority – a change in behaviour in response to a direct order. Assuming any persons witnessing an individual’s behaviour constitute an audience, it can be argued that both compliance and obedience could be related to audience effect. The audience may merely be influencing the behaviour of the performer in a more obvious manner.

It has been shown that the impact of audience effect may vary based on the size and demeanour of the audience in question. This may lead to the question of whether the impact of an audience may vary based on the sex of said audience. Athenstaedt, Haas and Schwab (2004) argue that a reason the sexes interact and behave differently is the differing expectations of them by society. Men and women both tend to adjust their behaviour according to the sex of the person they are interacting with or being observed by. An example of this may be seen in the workplace. Sussman (1980) argues that people
have different expectations of what behaviours may be important in the workplace, based on the sex of the person they are subordinate to. Sussman (1980) showed that women working as subordinates to a man find it more important to show emotional support to their boss than if they work under a woman. Furthermore, men find it more important to show emotional support when working under a woman.

Audience effect and societal expectations of the sexes impact human behaviour and reactions in interesting ways. Various social influences, primarily conformity, may further impact the event of audience effect. The present study will use an original method, involving a potentially nervous situation for individual participants, to determine whether the sex of the participant and the sex of the audience influence human behaviour and reactions.

Method

Participants

Participants were 20 university-aged individuals recruited by various means. While the study was initially advertised via posters at Huron University College, at the University of Western Ontario, they generated very little interest. As a result, the majority of participants were friends and family of those involved in the study (researcher and tour guides). Approximately one half of the participants were male, with the majority of participants being from Huron University College.
Murder Stories and Sex

Materials

The materials included a standard letter of information and consent form, as well as a debriefing statement. The murder story (see figure 1) was typed on a single piece of white paper for easy reading by participants. Stop-watches and a flashlight were also used.

The study took place in a three storey, red brick church (see floor plan, figure 2). With the exception of the kitchen, all areas used were constructed of old concrete and brick with white painted walls and floors. The kitchen was a large brightly lit area, fully renovated in stainless steel. All the lights in the church, with the exception of the kitchen, remained off for the purposes of the study. The kitchen door remained closed at all times to maintain darkness in the rest of the church building. The tour guides’ flashlight and red lights on the exit signs provided the only sources of illumination during the tours.

Procedure

The original method randomly divided the participants into two groups based on their sex. Each participant then had an equal chance of being paired with a male or female tour guide (audience). This resulted in four conditions: (1) male audience, male participant; (2) male audience, female participant; (3) female audience, male participant; (4) female audience, female participant.

Although the original method required the participants to go on individual tours, the majority arrived in groups of three to five individuals. Upon their arrival, the participants were greeted at the side doors by the researcher and taken directly into the kitchen. Upon entering the kitchen, the participants were administered the letter of
Sometime during the 1950s it is rumoured that there was a brutal murder resulting in theories of this church being haunted. The maintenance worker at the time was engaged to be married to a member of the church choir. The night before the wedding, the maintenance worker went to the church to make sure everything was in working order and all set up for his big day. The man probably went through most of the church before making his way up to do a check of the attic. It seems that when he arrived up there, he discovered his fiancée being intimate with another man. (As the story goes, she had been having an affair for quite some time). Thrown into a jealous rage, the maintenance worker beat the other man to death with a hammer. Of course, no woman is going to stick around to watch her fiancée beat a man to death, so she ran. The maintenance worker, having left the man's body on the floor of the attic, cornered his fiancée in the choir's robe closet and killed her with his bare hands. From there, it seems the maintenance worker realized what he had done, because his was the first body found in the morning – hanging from the railing of the choir loft, overlooking the church's sanctuary. The bodies were found by the minister when he arrived the morning of the wedding.

Figure 1: The murder story as seen by participants prior to taking the church tour.
Figure 2: Floor plan of the Church building used for tours. From left to right: Floor 3 (attic); Floor 2; Floor 1 (Start of tour).
information and consent forms, and asked to read the murder story. Once a participant had completed the story they were introduced to their tour guide and sent on their individual flashlight-led tour.

The tour guide led the way out of the kitchen, closing the door behind them, and crossed the hall to the boiler room. At the boiler room door the participant was reminded that this was where the murderer had worked, and asked if they would enter first. Using a concealed stop watch, the tour guide then timed the interval length between the completion of the question (start time of every task) and the criterion being met. In all tasks criterion was met in one of two ways: either a negative response being given, or the participant completing the requested task. In this case, the task was completed when the participant touched the doorknob.

After exploring the boiler room the tour proceeded across the great hall and up the back stairs to the attic. In the doorway of the attic the participant was reminded that this was where the first murder was alleged to have taken place, and asked to walk across the room to turn on the overhead light. The task was completed upon the participant turning on the overhead light. The tour guide then joined the participant on the other side of the room and led the way down the main stairs to the back hall located on the main level. The tour guide paused at the robe closet in order to remind the participant of the second murder committed within it. The tour guide asked the participant if they would like to enter the closet in order to get an idea of its size. The task was considered to be completed upon the participant stepping into the closet.
The tour proceeded from the robe closet through a neighbouring door into the sanctuary. The tour entered the sanctuary just behind the alter and continued down the middle aisle to the main entrance, pausing to point out the choir loft where the maintenance man was supposed to have been found. The next task point took place at the stairs leading up to the choir loft. The participant was asked to proceed past a ‘closed’ sign and up the stairs ahead of the tour guide. The task was completed when the participant passed the ‘closed’ sign. The participant was then led across the front of the choir loft, pausing halfway across to look down into the sanctuary. The tour returned to the kitchen, via the junior hall, where the participant was debriefed and thanked.

After each participant completed their tour, the researcher quickly walked the path to collect the data listed on the stop watches. The watches, originally sequestered in the guide’s pocket, had been left at each location to avoid data confusion. The tour was quickly re-set in preparation for the next participant. The concept of the study and method of data collection were uniquely designed for this study. As such, reliability and validity cannot be accounted for.

Results

It was hypothesised that males overall would perform tasks faster than females. In addition, it was theorised that the male-male condition would perform drastically faster than the female-female condition due to the possible in-depth impacts of the audience effect.

As can be seen in Figure 3, the results were in the predicted direction. On average, male participants performed the tasks in less time than did female, demonstrating less
Figure 3: Average time for participants to complete all tasks based on (1) Male Audience versus (2) Female Audience.
nervousness. Furthermore, participants with a female audience took longer than did those of the same sex accompanied by a male audience. However, a two-by-two ANOVA demonstrated that these results were not significant. Complete results can be seen in the ANOVA Summary Table (see appendix).

Discussion

The results of this study do not confirm the hypothesis that sex is an impact on audience effect. The results were in the predicted direction, however they were insignificant.

The population of interest for this study were young adults. While all participants in the study met this criterion, the sample cannot be said to be wholly representative. Due to time constraints, as well as lack of interest, the sample was small and not representative of the desired population. The majority of participants attended Huron University College; as such, these participants are assumed to be of similar academic and economic status. Although some of the participants were recruited outside of the university, the majority coming from Huron University College calls into question how representative the sample truly is.

Many of the flaws and limitations of this study centre on the participants' behaviour. Not only did many of the participants know those who conducted the study, some participants were familiar with the church in which it took place. The participants who were familiar with the researcher and tour guides displayed an undesired level of comfort with the entire study. Furthermore, any participant who was familiar with the church could have known that the story they were presented with was falsified. These
factors, on occasion, removed the impact of nervousness, causing inconsistency between individual results. On the occasion that a participant familiar with the researcher(s) and/or the church remained nervous, it was usually claimed in subsequent conversations that this was due to a preconception of some form of trickery being included in the study. In most cases, this trick was specified to be something along the lines of a classic “haunted house” -- i.e. participants were afraid they would be jumped at, grabbed, or otherwise purposely frightened. This conception may have impacted data and results because reactions were not due to audience effect; but rather due to the fear of some trickery to come.

Further issues were created by the participants arriving and leaving in groups. As a result, all participants remained grouped in the kitchen except when on their individual tours. It is possible that this caused the level of nervousness to decrease over time as participants who had not yet completed the study witnessed the reactions of those returning. Most people returned to the kitchen expressing feelings of excitement and relief. Any subsequent research should take this issue into account and provide “before and after” holding areas so as to keep pre and post tour participants separate.

The methodology used was designed specifically for the purposes of this study. As such, no part of this study has yet been tested for reliability or validity. Although the measure used was time and can be assumed to be fairly reliable, there is always the possibility of human error. If this study were to be repeated, test-retest reliability and internal consistency tests should both be performed. Further assessment of the validity is also needed.
The internal consistency of the study was perhaps impacted by inconsistencies between the tour guides. Each tour guide had a drastically different personality and comfort level with the church building. As such, results may vary due to the perceived comfort level of the tour guide rather than the guide’s sex. It is probable that certain cues may have been given by one tour guide which were not given by the other. Had the ANOVA results been significant, it is still possible that the effect would not have been created by the sex of the tour guide, but rather by the difference in cues given. This, as well as other possible influences of audience effect, was not heavily taken into account during the creation of this study.

The primary reason why the results of this study were insignificant may have been the lack of participants. Were a future study able to take more time and to recruit more participants, it is possible that the results may be different. Future research should take into account the other possible influences of audience effect, beyond the sex of those involved. Other improvements could include adding a wider variety of tasks, and a post-tour questionnaire requesting participants’ reasons for their actions and the expectations they had coming into the study.

Past studies have shown that audience effect alone has an impact on people’s behaviour. Furthermore, it has been shown that social influences such as demeanour may act as cues and otherwise impact audience effect. The sex of an audience may act as a cue to an individual and subsequently impact their behaviour and reactions. This study was set up to demonstrate that sex roles act as cues and, as such, are an influence on audience effect. However, the ANOVA demonstrated insignificant results and therefore no such thing can presently be argued.
Audience effect is an interesting area within human behaviour and should be given more consideration. However, there are many possible influences on audience effect. As such, it is difficult to control all the variables in order to properly focus on one specific influence, such as sex. The results of this study were in the predicted direction, which may be promising to future research.
References


ANOVA Summary Table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rows (Audience)</td>
<td>253.79</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>253.79</td>
<td>1.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Columns (Participants)</td>
<td>328.95</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>328.95</td>
<td>1.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td>6.08</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.08</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>2739.28</td>
<td>15.59</td>
<td>228.27</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3328.11</td>
<td>18.59</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>