Pursuit - The Journal of Undergraduate Research at the University of Tennessee

Volume 6 | Issue 1 Article 23

April 2015

Do misery and happiness both love company? The emotional consequences of listening to experiences shared by others.

Samantha Warchol
University of Tennessee, Knoxville, jross26@vols.utk.edu

Pursuit: The Journal of Undergraduate
Research at the University of Tennessee

trace.tennessee.edu/pursuit

PURSUIT

Do Misery and Happiness Both Love Company? The Emotional Consequences of Listening to Experiences Shared by Others

SAMANTHA WARCHOL
Advisor: Dr. Gary Shteynberg

Sharing personal experiences and events is an important component of developing personal relationships and connecting with others. Two adages present contradictory thoughts on how "friends" will respond to personal accomplishments or difficulties. The first claims, "When times get rough, you will find out who your real friends are"; the other claims, "Misery loves company". This study focuses on how sharing information affects individual mood in order to understand how sharing a personal experience may affect relationships and listeners. Previous research has focused on how the speaker potentially benefits from sharing personal experiences with others. Instead, this study attempts to understand how the listener is affected emotionally by having an event shared with them; do people typically enjoy hearing about others' happiness or do people relish in the misery of others? The "Personal Experiences Survey" functions as a preliminary measure that asks participants to first act as a "speaker" in sharing their own personal experience and then asks them to be a "listener" and read another individual's personal experience. Participants' moods are measured both after acting as the "speaker" and as the "listener" in order to detect overall mood changes. The participants with the greatest increase in positive mood were those who shared their own positive experience and then read a positive experience; participants also preferred listening to events congruent to their present mood. Overall, this study shows that individuals focus on their own experiences, minimizing the experiences of others unless they, as a listener, benefit.

Introduction

Sharing personal experiences and events is an important component of developing personal relationships and connecting with others. Two adages present contradictory thoughts on how "friends" will respond to personal accomplishments or difficulties. The first claims, "When times get rough, you will find out who your real friends are"; the other claims, "Misery loves company". These contradictory situations pose the question of when to share information with others and how a listener is affected by an event told to them. Do people typically enjoy hearing about others' happiness, or do people relish in the misery of others? Although this study cannot fully answer this question, it acts as a preliminary measure that examines how people are emotionally affected by the experiences of others.

The effects of disclosing or sharing personal events has been widely studied in the area of Social Psychology, particularly in the context of traumatic experiences, such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in veterans. Although this research examines the effects of information sharing, it was not significantly used in the development of this particular study, because first, it focuses on the sharing of extreme news and experiences. Secondly, this area of study examines the effects on the speaker, such as the veteran, instead of the effects on the family member or friend who is listening to the experience being shared. More recent research focuses on the sharing of less extreme events, including what type of information is the most likely to be shared and the potential benefits of sharing for both the speaker and listener.

Researchers like Heath (1996) have examined what type of news people prefer to share based on personal relevance, the source of the news and the conditions of the environment. Studies such as this have provided a foundation for understanding how and why information is shared. In his series of studies, Heath asked participants to select which "facts" or events they would be most likely to share. These surveys contained a variety of positive, negative, extreme and mild "facts" or events from reliable sources. After his series of surveys, Heath developed the *congruence hypothesis*, which first states that individuals are the most likely to share information that is personally relevant to them. Secondly, it suggests that individuals are likely to share information that is congruent with the overall mood or environment. For example, in a negative environment people responded that they were much more likely to share bad news; however, when the environment was positive, participants were more likely to share something positive. Finally, Heath affirmed that moderate news was the most likely to be shared, since people viewed it as more reliable. This final portion of his analysis is particularly relevant to this study because it focuses on the sharing of moderate news, which occurs most often. Heath's *congruence hypothesis* was used as a foundation for developing this hypotheses and survey.

Studies have also been conducted on the sharing of positive events and how speakers attempt to capitalize on their happiness from an event by receiving a positive reaction from a listener (Gable, Reis, Impett & Asher, 2004). Related studies asked participants to write about an event that occurred during their day, whether or not they shared this event with someone close to them and what type of reaction they received from the person with whom they shared their event (Gable, Gonzaga & Strachman, 2006). Gable's studies analyzed how different types of reactions, such as positive or negative and constructive or passive, influenced how the listener benefited emotionally from the event and how the relationship between listener and speaker may have been affected. In 2013, Dr. Hackenbracht and Dr. Gasper attempted to further understand the motives of a listener, through the *belongingness hypothesis*. This hypothesis argues that a listener benefits from a speaker's emotional disclosure through an increase in the positive relationship between the two individuals, provoking an increased sense of belonging on the part of the listener. Similar to Dr. Hackenbracht and Gasper's research, this paper focuses on the effects of the listener, who is listening to either a positive or negative personal experience from an unknown individual. In the "Personal Experiences Survey", the need to belong and the benefits of sharing for the speaker are not primary variables, since participants are reading

responses written by an unknown individual. The only information that participants are given is that the "speaker" is another student at their university. There was no manipulation of exclusion on the part of the listener; however, the *belongingness hypothesis* provides a framework for how participants may be emotionally affected by both sharing and then listening to negative experiences.

This study utilizes previous research on how listeners benefit from disclosure and the sharing of personal events. The "Personal Experiences Survey" is a preliminary examination of how individuals will be emotionally affected by the everyday personal experiences of an unknown individual. The importance of personal experiences is defined in the survey. Positive personal experiences were explained to be:

> "Personal experiences often provoke an increase of mood, a stronger sense of being connected to others, increased self-worth and achievement for an individual. These experiences can be more generally defined by experiences that are not related to work or education and that provoke positive feelings. Personal experiences may be smaller experiences that happen in a day or month..."

Negative personal experiences were described in the same manner except in that they provoke negative feelings, including a weakened sense of being connected to others and potentially decreased self-worth. Based on previous research, I first hypothesize that participants will be positively affected as a listener when they have shared a positive personal event, regardless of whether or not they read a positive event. Secondly, I predict there will be a noticeable increase in negative affect when participants share a negative personal event and are asked to read the negative experience of an unknown individual. Unlike the *belongingness hypothesis,* (Hackenbracht & Gable, 2013) participants have little to no motivation to respond positively to a positive event that they did not share in, likely provoking an increase in negative affect. My final hypothesis is that Heath's c*ongruence hypothesis* will be reinforced; participants will likely be the most responsive and affected in the conditions where the personal event they share (as the speaker) and the event they read about (as the listener) are of the same positive or negative valence. Participants also filled out the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) survey, which measures overall positive and negative affect using a mixed list of words describing their present mood. These PANAS results were the primary data source used to test the hypotheses in order to understand when to share information and how listeners are emotionally affected.

Methods

Participants

There were a total of 1003 participants who completed the survey. Some responses were omitted from analysis based on incomplete data, yielding a total of 970 responses used for final analysis. Condition One contains 241 responses for share positive/read positive; Condition Two contains 246 responses for share positive/read negative. Condition Three contains 240 responses for share negative/read positive, and Condition Four contains 243 responses for share negative/read negative. Table 1 in the Appendix shows the experimental design. The majority of participants were 18-23 years old, freshmen at the university, and approximately 68% of the participants were females. All responses were anonymous; participants were assigned a separate ID code in order to ensure that they received course credit. Due to these factors, I will focus on overall Within-Subjects changes in mood by comparing mood scores for all four conditions.

In order to participate in the survey, participants had to be age 18 or older, and all participants were currently enrolled at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville. Participants

received credit for introductory Psychology courses or extra credit for upper-level Psychology courses upon completion of the survey. Additionally, they were asked to complete an Informed Consent form and were told that they could withdraw from the study at any point without penalty.

General Procedures

This study is based on the results of "The Personal Experience Survey", which consists of two primary stages, yielding a total of four conditions. In stage one, participants act as the "speaker" by submitting a personal event, which is not included in the analysis for this paper. In stage two, participants act as the "listener" by reading an event. The events from both stages are classified as either a positive or negative personal event. In order to create the necessary conditions, participants were randomly assigned to one of two groups in each stage. Of the four conditions, two were classified as "shared" or "congruent" conditions in which the participant had either a positive/positive combination or negative/negative combination through random assignment.

In stage one of the survey participants were randomly assigned to share (through a typed free-response) either a positive or negative personal experience they had within the last week. These personal events were described as an event not related to school or work, which caused either a positive or negative increase in mood (depending on which condition the participant was assigned to). Sharing this personal experience will help to create a sense of a shared or un-shared experience later in the study, as well as positively or negatively valence their mood. After typing in their response, which is not used in analysis, PANAS was used to evaluate their mood. Participants were given a list of words including upset, active and inspired and asked to indicate how much this word reflected their current mood ranging from "Not at All" to "Extremely".

In stage two, participants were told that they would read a positive or negative response that a previous participant has agreed to share. Here, the participants were randomly assigned to read either a positive or negative event. It is important to note that both the positive and negative responses were written by the primary investigator in order to ensure consistency and present a distinctively positive or negative emotion from the speaker. Although previous research typically incorporated direct interaction between participants and a confederate, this study used pre-written responses within the survey in order to share an experience with participants while still maintaining internal validity. Both stories included in the survey were intended to be relatable to undergraduates regardless of gender. Participants assigned to reading the positive event were asked to read the following:

> *I've been working at the same job for the last couple of years, and this year we had a whole bunch of new staff members come in. One of the new guys is really cute, sweet and funny, and I really like him. For like the last two months we talked like all day everyday, at work over text... all the time. He finally told me a few days ago that he liked me all that time and was just too shy to ask me out! He finally asked me out, and I'm so excited, since he's the first guy I've really liked in a while!*

Participants assigned to reading the negative event were asked to read the following:

> *I went home to visit my boyfriend and family last weekend and decided to bring back some stuff from my house. My car was packed and stuff was everywhere. When I got back to campus, I unloaded my car and thought I got everything, so I went and parked it outside near the Fort. The next morning I was running late for class and needed to turn in some last minute homework but couldn't find my laptop, so I ran out to my car to see if it was still in the backseat from when I had all my stuff packed in there. When I got to my car, I found that someone had broken the window out and stolen my laptop from the backseat.*

Data was collected determining how long participants spent reading the responses before being asked to complete PANAS for a second time. The first time participants were asked to complete PANAS was used as a control for mood, while the second time was used as a comparison for how participants were potentially affected by reading the experience of another. The scores for each word in the PANAS were used to calculate overall mood scores, positive affect scores (the positive component of mood) and negative affect scores (negative component of mood) for the first and second PANAS as well as comparisons between the two measures. These scores were the primary data source used in analyzing how participants' moods varied depending on their condition. Additionally, after acting as the "listener" participants were asked if they were interested in reading a longer version of the personal experience shared with them.

Results

For analytical purposes, the primary dependent variables will be positive affect score (PA), negative affect score (NA) and overall mood score (PA_minus_NA). Additional variables were used in analysis but many were based on these original scores. Each of these scores are based on PANAS, which consists of two sets of words, one set which is largely positive words and the second set which is largely negative words. When a person responds "Not at All", the score for the words is closer to 1, where a response of "Extremely" has a score closer to 5. A completely neutral mood would average to 0, where an extremely positive would be 5 and extremely negative a -5. The independent variables will be the positive/negative share and read conditions, which are grouped into the following four conditions:

Condition 1: share positive/ read positive (coded 1/1)

Condition 2: share positive/ read negative (coded 1/0)

Condition 3: share negative/ read positive (coded 0/1)

Condition 4: share negative/ read negative (coded 0/0)

Table 2 in the appendix shows the means for PA, NA and overall mood based on the condition.

To begin analysis, I tested the first hypothesis, which claimed that those in the two positive share conditions (Conditions 1 and 2) would have higher mood scores on average regardless of the read condition. In order to test this, an overall score for mood was calculated by taking the positive affect score (PA) minus the negative affect score (NA). Univariate analysis was done on the independent variable PA_minus_NA based on the four conditions. The mean score for Condition 1 (share positive/read positive) was 1.4, Condition 2 (share positive/ read negative) was .86, Condition 3 (share negative/ read positive) was 1.00 and Condition 4 was .83. Based on these initial means my hypothesis that Condition 2 will have one of the highest overall mood scores can be rejected. However, the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) test had a p-value of nearly .000 compared to an alpha value of .05 (this same alpha value will be used in all future analysis), meaning that at least one condition or variable was statistically significant. This likely was Condition 1, which had a notably higher overall mood score. To confirm this, a Planned Comparison test was used to evaluate which conditions had a statistically significant different mean score for overall mood. In this test, each individual condition was compared to the other conditions and a t-score was calculated to show how many standard deviations away from the mean overall mood score that particular condition was. Condition 1 had a t-value of 6.1080, meaning there was approximately a 0.00 probability that by chance the mean overall mood score would be that far away from the mean response for the other three conditions. Based on these results, part of the first hypothesis, which states that individuals who share a positive event as a speaker and who read a positive event as a listener have the highest overall mood, is confirmed.

To test my second hypothesis that Condition 4 (share negative/read negative) would

have the highest NA, the PANAS results were used. While there were negative affect scores for both after sharing and after reading, here the primary focus was the NA score from after listening/ reading the shared event. Basic descriptive analysis showed that Condition 4 had the highest NA score of 1.54, while the average NA score was approximately 1.46. To test this, a series of t-tests were used where each condition was compared to Condition 4 to see if there was a statistically significant difference. These tests concluded that there was not a statistically significant difference in mean NA score for the individuals who were asked to share a negative event and then read a negative event, meaning this hypothesis was rejected. However, I decided to also look at the relationship between how long individuals who were in Condition 4 spent reading the shared response and whether they were any more or less likely to respond that they wanted to read more. Based on this Planned Comparison, those in Condition 1 were more likely to respond that they were interested in reading more; this value proved statistically significant, while the remaining three conditions had approximately equal means for the number of people who responded that they would be interested in reading more. Similarly, analysis showed no statistical difference in the amount of time the individuals spent reading either the positive or negative passage that was shared.

To test my final hypothesis that Conditions 1 and 3 will have the most extreme change in either positive or negative affect, I calculated both negative and positive affect for all four conditions in attempts to find a statistically significant difference in affect for those two conditions. ANOVA tests focused on the difference of medians for the conditions, since medians tend to be more outlier resistant and can be used in conjunction with ANOVA tests. Basic descriptive analysis of the data was based on the four conditions. Condition 1 (share positive/ read positive) averaged .3 higher for the positive affect score, while Condition 4 (share negative/ read negative) had the highest negative affect, with a score that was .15 higher than average. I then tested to see if there was statistical significance for Condition 1 having a higher positive affect (PA) score on average. The Planned Differences analysis here concluded that Condition 1 having a mean PA of 2.75 versus the average PA for each of the other conditions (and the total mean PA score of 2.48) had approximately 0.00 probability of occurring based on a t-value of 5.25. This means that it is nearly impossible that this large of a difference in the mean score for Condition 1 versus the other conditions would occur by chance. This particular outcome was expected since analysis from the first hypothesis showed Condition 1 had the highest overall mood. Without even running further analysis, the hypothesis that Condition 3 would have the highest NA score was rejected, since Condition 3 had a slightly below average score for negative affect. The mean scores for negative affect is included in the Appendix as Table 2. These results in particular emphasize that the positive share condition provoked a particularly large increase in positive affect and overall mood, while the other conditions were not as affected.

Based on the previous hypotheses, the conditions of the most statistical difference were those individuals who shared both a positive event and who read a positive event. Additional analysis was done to understand how the details of Condition 1 could be applied in sharing daily events. First, the change in PA was calculated by taking the PA score from after reading the passage and subtracting the PA from after the participant shared a personal event. The same was done for NA. Planned Comparisons for the four conditions showed a few important statistical differences between the conditions. First, Conditions 2 and 3 showed a statistically significant change of NA between the first and second PANAS. In particular, Condition 2 was the only condition with a positive mean for the change in NA. This meant that the individuals in Condition 2, who shared a positive event and then read a negative event, were the only group to have a higher average NA score on the second PANAS than the first. Individuals in Condition 3 had the greatest decrease in NA score between the first and second PANAS. This indicated that people had the greatest change in NA when the event they shared was not of the same positive or negative valence as the event they read about. Analysis for Change_in_PA between the first and

second PANAS showed a statistically significant difference in mean Change_in_PA between all four conditions. Conditions 2 and 4 in particular had the largest decrease in PA between the two measures, with mean PA score being .34 to .39 points respectively lower on average for the second PANAS. This suggested that reading a negative event, regardless of shared event valence, caused a significant decrease in positive affect. It is also worth noting that the mean change in PA for all of the conditions was negative, which potentially suggests that positive affect was not as long lasting as negative affect in this survey.

Discussion

First of all, it should be noted that this survey acts only as a preliminary measure to understand how sharing events affects a listener in order to consider when to share events, what types of events to share and how others may be affected emotionally. The analysis done here has affirmed previous research, such as Heath's *congruence hypothesis*, where participants preferred to share and read about events that are consistent with the overall mood. Individuals who were in congruent or shared conditions (Conditions 1 and 4) had the most extreme mood responses, which suggests that they were the most reactive and aroused during the survey. Participants in Condition 1 also expressed the most interest in listening further after reading the shared passage. Although positive affect dropped noticeably after completing the first and second PANAS for all conditions, Condition 1 participants, who had the highest positive affect (PA) after sharing and reading a positive event, also had the smallest decrease in their positive affect score after the second measure. Condition 4 had the highest negative affect (NA) scores throughout the study but had a moderate decrease in negative affect scores in the end, indicating that this mood was also somewhat resilient to change. Conditions 1 and 4 in particular emphasize that the individuals who were the most reactive emotionally (highest PA or NA) typically did not experience as significant of a change in mood scores by the end of the study. These two conditions had minimal to moderate changes in mood (as shown in Table 2). This general consistency or endurance of mood suggests that people are most affected by congruent situations.

Secondly, Condition 1 proved to be the most significant overall condition in regards to positive affect score, negative affect score, overall mood and interest in reading or "listening" further. This observation indicates that people are most likely to listen to positive events, although there was no difference in likelihood to want to share an event based on condition or event valence. The primary question was how people are affected by being a listener, and Condition 1 shows that positive events have a greater ability to influence mood in terms of personal everyday events. This boost in positive affect though from everyday events does not seem to be enduring over a long period of time, while the boost in negative affect (or a general decrease in mood) seems to be more resilient or longer-lasting once it occurs. The difference in overall mood score for Conditions 2 and 4 show the influence of reading a negative event. Participants in Condition 2, who first shared their own positive experience, were not as negatively affected as the participants in Condition 4 who both shared and read a negative event. Similarly, participants in Condition 1 were more influenced by reading a positive event than the individuals in Condition 3 who had previously shared a negative event. These two results show that individual mood, whether someone was in a positive or negative mood independent of others (participants shared a positive or negative experience of their own which primed their mood), was noticeably more important in determining mood than the event valence that was shared.

Finally, analysis showed that although peoples' personal experiences primed their overall mood, they could be affected as a listener in a distinctively positive or negative way. For example, Condition 2 presented the only positive increase in intensity for negative affect, while

also having the largest decrease in positive affect of the four conditions. At the first PANAS, Condition 2 had the second highest PA score, where it then had the second lowest PA score after the second PANAS. This represents that individuals not only prefer to listen to events that are congruent to their current mood, but also are negatively affected by even an unknown individual's difficulties. On the other hand, Final_Mood_Change was calculated in order to show which group had the largest change of overall mood through the course of the survey. Condition 3, where participants first shared a negative experience and then read the positive experience of another individual, was the only condition that experienced a positive increase in mood, meaning reading the positive experience of another individual improved their overall mood. Conditions with incongruent event valences had the greatest influence on mood, where Condition 2 had the greatest decrease in mood and Condition 3 had the greatest increase in mood.

This research is limited because it uses a basic survey instead of face-to-face interactions. These results could be further examined with friends, family or romantic partners in order to understand how listening to an unknown individual may differ. It is highly likely that interacting with someone in person, where they can see physical reactions, or listening to someone close to you is a significantly different experience. Future surveys could also be expanded to include more questions, experiences and an initial PANAS measure as a baseline for mood in order to better analyze how sharing events versus listening to events may affect individuals.

Overall, the "Personal Experiences Survey" depicts some important relationships for sharing information. First, people prefer congruency, or listening to an event that is of the same positive or negative valence as their current mood. This congruency actually causes only a moderate change in overall mood, which likely explains why people prefer it. Perhaps people, especially in individualistic cultures, focus on themselves and their personal experience first and most likely prefer to not be seriously emotionally affected by unknown individuals. If someone is in a good mood, then perhaps it is better to share positive experiences and events first, and hold off for a while on sharing moderate negative events. Secondly, people are most noticeably affected by incongruent situations. In these cases, the valence of the event being shared has greater influence in determining the listener's mood. Therefore, if someone is having a bad day, sharing a positive story may be just enough to brighten up his or her mood a little; however, sharing bad news with someone in a great mood might just cast a shadow on his or her day and your relationship.

References

Gable, S., Gonzaga, G., & Strachman, A. (2006). Will you be there for me when things go right? Supportive responses to positive event disclosures. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 91, 904–917.

Gable, S. L., Reis, H. T., Impett, E. A., & Asher, E. R. (2004). What do you do when things go right? The intrapersonal and interpersonal benefits of sharing positive events. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 87*(2), 228-245. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.87.2.228

Hackenbracht, J., Gasper, K. (2013). I'm all ears: The need to belong motivates listening to emotional disclosure. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology,* 49.5, 915. Retrieved from http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S002210311300067X

Heath, C. (1996) Do People Prefer to Pass Along Good or Bad News? Valence and Relevance of News as Predictors of Transmission Propensity. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*. 68(2):79-94.

Reis, H. T., Smith, S. M., Carmichael, C. L., Caprariello, P. A., Tsai, F., Rodrigues, A., & Maniaci, M. R. (2010). Are you happy for me? How sharing positive events with others provides personal and interpersonal benefits. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 99*(2)

Appendix

Table 1: Experiment Design

		Participant Share Experience (Speaker)	
		Positive	**Negative**
Participant Reads Experience (Listener)	**Positive**	Shared positive experience	Not shared positive experience
	Negative	Not shared negative experience	Shared negative experience

Table 2: PA, NA, PA_minus_NA, Change_in_NA, Change_in_PA, Final_Mood_Change and MoreReading_DV means based on Four Conditions

Report

Condition#		MoreReading_DV	PA_afterself	NA_afterself	PA_DV	NA_DV	PA_minus_NA_DV	Change_in_NA	Change_in_PA	PA_plus_NA_DV	Final_Mood_Change
1	Mean	1.39	2.8557	1.4484	2.7520	1.3481	1.4039	-.1002	-.1037	4.1001	-.0035
	N	241	241	241	241	241	241	241	241	241	241
	Std. Deviation	.488	.90461	.59862	.99579	.57083	1.16473	.29771	.44581	1.13062	.54190
2	Mean	1.50	2.7888	1.4914	2.3979	1.5367	.8612	.0453	-.3909	3.9346	-.4363
	N	246	246	246	246	246	246	246	246	246	246
	Std. Deviation	.501	.85961	.59888	.86650	.58801	1.05157	.40262	.53636	1.04276	.75596
3	Mean	1.45	2.5577	1.5845	2.4179	1.4140	1.0040	-.1705	-.1398	3.8319	.0308
	N	243	244	244	244	244	244	244	244	244	244
	Std. Deviation	.498	.87627	.62998	.90097	.57908	1.11324	.35164	.40148	1.02706	.55197
4	Mean	1.48	2.7111	1.6027	2.3683	1.5389	.8294	-.0628	-.3428	3.9073	-.2785
	N	240	240	239	240	240	240	239	240	240	239
	Std. Deviation	.501	.86287	.63355	.89582	.58639	1.12635	.40822	.50441	1.01193	.69973
Total	Mean	1.45	2.7281	1.5315	2.4835	1.4596	1.0239	-.0718	-.2446	3.9431	-.1724
	N	970	971	970	971	971	971	970	971	971	970
	Std. Deviation	.498	.88163	.61777	.92747	.58597	1.13580	.37555	.49033	1.05691	.67218

Note: Values closer to 1 for MoreReading_DV indicate interest in reading/listening more