



ARTICLE

Expressing Opinions: Differences in Private and Public Situations

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Conformity can be a problem in today's society and as a result it is important to study conformity within a society to make sure that valuable opinions are not suppressed. This particular experiment took into account self-regulation, awareness, and arousal to study how individual opinions to controversial statements change depending on the type of setting, private or public, that people are in. A total of 16 undergraduate students ages 18 to 46 from the University of California, Los Angeles participated as part of a course requirement. Each participant was given 20 statements to rate on a Likert scale in both the public and private setting. The results were analyzed using a 2 x 2 within-subjects ANOVA. The main effect of statement type revealed that the non-controversial topics received a much higher absolute average rating on the Likert scale than controversial questions. This is opposite of the effect that we predicted.

Introduction

Conformity is a big part of today's society. People conform to society's standards to be accepted by others. Thus, throughout the years people have learned that to be accepted they must adapt the views and behavior of the majority. However, when people conform to the views of the majority in public, it does not necessarily mean that they share the same views in private. This creates a problem because it causes people to suppress their opinions, as right or wrong as they may be. Therefore, people start to develop a public persona that is considerably different from their private persona. It is important to study conformity within a society to make sure that valuable opinions are not suppressed.

The need for conformity becomes apparent when certain stimuli are present. First, the individuals must be aware that they are in a social situation. A study explored the effect of strange requests on arousing an individual's awareness in a social situation (Santos, Leve, & Pratkanis 1994). The study uncovered that participants who were asked for strange amounts of change would be more likely to

give it to the panhandler than if they were asked for a typical amount of change. The presence of a strange request triggered awareness in the participant by disrupting their thoughts of refusal which led to compliance. The strange requests piqued the participant's interest about the panhandler, which made the participant more aware of the panhandler's presence and needs as a human being. Another attribute of a social situation is the presence of others. As people's awareness is piqued they become more aware of the presence of others. An experiment by Mullen, Bryant, and Driskell (1997) focused on what effect the presence of others had on arousal. The study was a meta-analysis to resolve the paradox of whether or not the presence of others increases or decreases arousal. The experimenters found that the levels of arousal depend on the situation and whether the presence of others was mere presence, which is defined as others not part of a group, audience (other as a monitor), or coactor (others part of the group) presence (Mullen, Bryant, & Driskell 1997). When people realized that someone was monitoring them, *audience presence*, their arousal increased. As a result, people tend to conform to appear likable to

others and therefore they will self-regulate their behavior and opinions to be accepted by others. An experiment performed by Vohs, Baumeister, Ciarocco (2005) focused on how self-regulation affects self-presentation and vice versa. Through the course of eight studies they found that if participants engage themselves in a task that requires self-regulation, such as trying to suppress thinking of a white bear, then they will have less self-regulation when they are faced with expressing their feelings in a social situation. The findings showed that people consciously manage the way in which they are going to present themselves. However, a study by Lambert, Payne, Jacoby, Shaffer, Chasteen, and Khan (2003), which focused on the expression of stereotypes, had a very surprising result. The study found that people will express more prejudice in a public setting than in a private one, a very counterintuitive finding. The study also showed that participants with greater anxiety expressed more prejudice than those with low or no anxiety.

This particular experiment took into account self-regulation, awareness, and arousal to study how individual opinions to controversial statements change depending on the type of setting, private or public. The study manipulated two independent variables, the type of setting and the type of statements. The type of setting was either private or public. In the public setting there was an *audience other* present that monitored the group to create arousal within the group (Bryant et al. 1997). In addition, participants in both settings received the same questions. Answering the same exact questions in both settings appeared strange to the participant, which piqued their awareness about their social situation (Santos et al. 1994). The dependent variable in this study was the absolute rating on the Likert scale -5(strongly disagree) to 5(strongly agree) with no zero rating to force people to make an opinion.

The predictions made in this study include that there will be a main effect due to the type of setting participants are faced with. In other words if participants are given questions to rate, in a private and in a public setting, then they will have higher absolute scores in the private rather than in the public setting. This is due to the fact that people have developed self-regulation when it comes to self-expression that will cause them to down play their strong opinions to what is socially acceptable (Vohs & Baumeister, 2005). Therefore, their ratings to statements will decrease in the social setting so that they do not express an extreme opinion that would not be considered likable. However, this main effect prediction disagrees with a study by Lambert et al. (2005) which found that individuals in a public setting would express greater prejudice than

individuals in the private setting. A person expressing great prejudice towards a topic would give a high absolute rating score when asked about their opinion on that statement. So it follows that if individuals would express greater prejudice in the private setting that would correspond to giving a higher rating to a statement about that topic. Another prediction made in this study is that participants would rate controversial questions with a higher absolute score than non-controversial questions because the controversial questions were chosen to elicit strong responses from participants. Statements such as “the war in Iraq is justified” would receive a higher absolute rating because of its nature to bring forth either very positive or very negative opinions, than statements such as “it is important to listen to classical music”, which lack this ability. The interaction predicted in this study is that when the type of setting is private, the absolute rating on the Likert scale is greater when the type of statements is controversial than when the type of statement is non-controversial. However, when the setting is public, the absolute rating on the Likert scale will be about the same when the type of statement is non-controversial and when the type of statement is controversial. This would occur because participants in the public setting would use self-regulation to express their opinion in a more neutral way because they have become aware of their social situation and their arousal is increased by the presence of a monitor. (Vohs et al, 2005; Bryant et al. 1994). By becoming aware of their social surroundings, participants would start to consciously manage their thoughts, which would cause them to downplay any strong opinions that they might have had.

Method

Participants

A total of 16 undergraduate students ages 18 to 46 from the University of California, Los Angeles (5 men and 11 women) participated as part of a course requirement. All of the 18 participants spoke, read, and wrote in English.

Design

The two independent variables were the type of setting (private or public) and the type of question (controversial or non-controversial). The private setting was defined as confidential completion of a questionnaire asking the participants to rate 20 statements on a Likert scale. The public setting was defined as the completion of the same questionnaire with spaces after each statement to explain each response, which the participants were told would be read aloud to the group anonymously. As a group we

decided on the non-controversial and controversial questions in the questionnaire based on our best judgment. The dependent variable was the average absolute rating on the Likert scale -5(strongly agree) to 5(strongly disagree). This scale is a type of interval scale. This experiment was a 2x2 within-subjects factorial design.

Materials and Apparatus

Participants were given a sheet, which directed them into two rooms in a particular order. Each sheet contained either the letter "P" or "S", depending on what room the participants should enter first. Room "P", the private room, had spaced out chairs behind desks as in a regular classroom with experimenter 1 overlooking the experiment. Room "S", the social room, had chairs arranged in a circle with experimenters 2 and 3 overlooking the experiment. Both rooms contained instruction sheets and a stopwatch. Each questionnaire in room "P" had a cover page, an instruction page, and consisted of 20 statements (10 controversial and 10 non-controversial) with instructions to rate them on a Likert scale that ranged from -5 to 5 with no zero so that participants would be forced to make a decision. Every other number on the scale was labeled:

-5(strongly disagree), -3(moderately disagree), -1(1slightly disagree), 1(1slightly agree), 3(moderately agree), 5(strongly agree). For each participant the statements were printed in random order, so that no two people had the questions presented to them in the same order. Each questionnaire in room "S" had a cover page, an instruction page, 20 statements and instructions to rate them on a Likert scale and a section for participants to briefly explain their responses. The 20 questions, the Likert scales, and the cover pages were identical in both rooms. The questions were once again random for each person within the room so that no two people received the questions in the same order. The question order across groups was the same so that the first participant in the room "P" had the questions in the same order as the first participant in room "S." Randomizing the questions was done to control for item effect.

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned sheets with the letter "P" or "S", which instructed them to go into a specific room. This was a way to counterbalance for order effect. The randomly assigned participants were called into the room at the same time, resulting in an equal amount of participants in each room (8 in room "P" and 8 in room "S"). Participants in room "P" were then asked

to sit down at a desk. Then experimenter 1 passed out a questionnaire and a pencil. Next, the participants were instructed to open up their questionnaires and follow along as experimenter 1 read the instructions, which asked participants to rate each statement presented in the questionnaire on a scale from -5(strongly disagree) to 5(strongly agree) by circling the number that best represented their feeling regarding each statement. In addition, the participants were informed that their answers would remain confidential and that they had 10 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Experimenter 1 made sure that the participants understood the instructions that were read to them and told the participants that they could begin the questionnaire. When participants were all done with the questionnaires they were asked to sit quietly. In room "S" participants were asked to sit in chairs that were arranged in a circle on the chairs provided so that all the participants could see each other. Experimenter 2 passed out a questionnaire and a pencil to each one of the participants. Then the participants were told to open up their questionnaires and follow along as the instructions were read by experimenter 2, which instructed participants to rate the 20 statements that will be given to them on a scale from -5(strongly disagree) to 5(strongly agree) and provide a brief reason for their response to each statement. The instructions made it clear that their responses would be read aloud to the group by experimenter 2 but that their identity would remain confidential and that they had 10 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Once everyone was done reading, experimenter 2 made sure that the participants understood the instructions that were read to them and told the participants they could begin the questionnaire. While the participants were filling out their questionnaires experimenter 3 stood outside of the circle with a clipboard and pretended to write notes about the participants. Once everyone responded they were asked to sit quietly. When both groups were done, the participants in room "P" were instructed to go to room "S." Consequently, the participants in room "S" went to room "P." Once again the participants in room "P" completed the questionnaire and the participants in group "S" completed the same questionnaire and gave brief explanations for their response and were told that their answers would be read aloud anonymously. After each participant was done with both experiments, they were thanked for their participation. At the end of the experiment the participants' average absolute rating was collected for analysis.

Results

Figure 1 presents the average absolute rating on the Likert scale when the rating was applied to the non-controversial versus controversial words as a function of the type of setting that the statements were presented in. Looking at the pattern of results displayed in Figure 1, it appears that non-controversial statements received a higher average rating than controversial statements in both the private and public setting. The degree to which the rating was affected by the type of setting, however, does not appear to depend on type of statements presented in each setting.

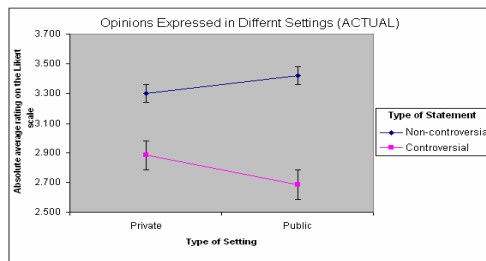


Figure 1. Absolute average rating on the Likert scale as a function of the type of setting and the type of statements as predicted.

To test these apparent effects, the data were analyzed using a 2 x 2 within subjects ANOVA, which revealed a significant main effect of type of statement, such that the average rating on the Likert scale was significantly higher when the statements were non-controversial ($M=3.359$, $SD=0.316$) than when the statements were controversial ($M=2.872$, $SD=0.340$), regardless of the type of setting in which they were presented, $F(1,159) = 21.711$, $MSE = 1.751$, $p < 0.0005$. A significant main effect of setting type was not revealed, such that the average absolute rating on the Likert scale was about the same when items were presented in a private setting ($M=3.091$, $SD=0.348$) as well as in the public setting ($M=3.141$, $SD=0.372$), regardless of the type of statements, $F(1,159) = 0.151$, $MSE=2.642$, $p=0.689$. Additionally, the apparent interaction between type of statements and the type of setting that is indicated in Figure 1 was not revealed to be significant, $F(1,159) = 0.370$, $MSE=2.042$, $p=0.544$.

Table 1

Statement Type	Type of Setting		Marginal Means	Standard Deviations
	Private	Public		
Non-controversial	3.300	3.419	3.359	0.316
Controversial	2.881	2.863	2.872	0.340
Marginal Means	3.091	3.141		
Standard Deviations	0.348	0.372		

Table 2

Analysis of Variance for Opinions Expressed Within-subjects

Source of Variation	df	MS	F	p
Statement Type	1	38.025	21.711	<0.0005
Error	159	1.751		
Type of Setting	1	0.400	0.151	0.698
Error	159	2.642		
Statement x Setting	1	0.756	0.370	0.544
Error	159	2.042		

Discussion

Analysis of results revealed one main effect and no interaction. The main effect revealed that the non-controversial statements received a much higher absolute average rating on the Likert scale than controversial questions. This is opposite of the effect that we predicted. Perhaps, this is because most non-controversial statements that we choose for this experiment had a distinct yes or no answer and as a result most participants either gave a -5 (strongly disagree) or 5 (strongly agree) rating. Also, questions that are either controversial or non-controversial can also be personal. If some questions are personal and others are not, then the personal aspect of the questions could have been a confounding variable in this study. The main effect of the type of setting, private or public was not revealed perhaps because the participants considered themselves to be in the public setting in both situations. Even though we tried hard to make the public setting distinct from the private setting, the feedback from the participants revealed that because the participants in the public setting were in a hurry to finish the questionnaires, they did not have enough time to look around to absorb the fact they were positioned in the circle where others can glance over and see their answers. Also the participants were not really affected by the experimenter monitoring them because they were hurrying to finish their questionnaires. Taking the results into consideration, there is an implication that can be made from this experiment. People are more likely to express stronger opinions to questions that are non-controversial regardless of whether the setting is private or public.

Considering the limitations and the implication of this experiment, an extension of this experiment can be done. First, statements that are given to the participants should be chosen carefully.

From, this experiment we graphed the frequency of responses to show that not all statements generated the same response this can be seen in Figures 3-6. Looking at Figure 2 and 3 we can see that some controversial questions were rated as we expected, they received a lower rating in the public setting than in the private and others did not. In addition, some non-controversial questions were rated as we predicted, lower in both settings, and some were rated higher in both settings as it can be seen from Figure 4 and 5. Based on this experiment it can be seen that, great care should be taken when choosing questions to run an experiment. Another thing that should be controlled is the setting. The participants in a public setting can be put into a circle with a monitor pretending to record their expressions, just like this study, but if it is possible the participants should share their opinions orally with the group. However, the participants in the private setting should answer the questionnaire completely in private with no one else around. Changing these aspects of the experiment might show an interaction and two main effects. A different experiment that can be conducted is an experiment only based on types of statements to see why some non-controversial statements get rated higher than others and to why some controversial questions decrease in rating in the public setting and some increase.

Controversial Questions That Were Rated Higher in the Public Setting

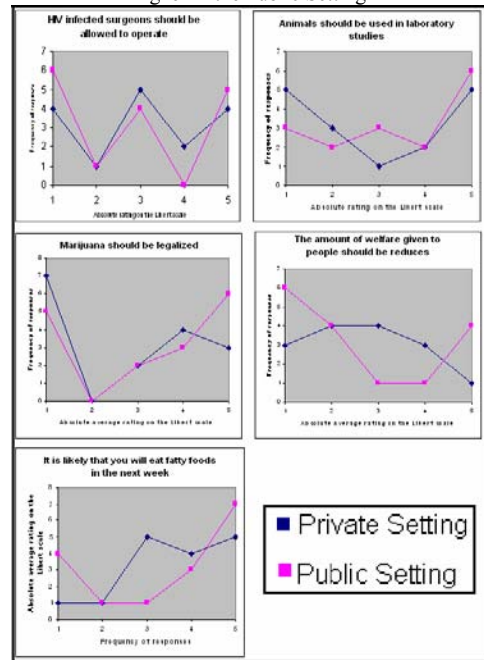


Figure 3. Frequency of responses as a function of controversial questions that were rated higher in the public than the private setting.

Controversial Questions That Were Rated Lower in the Public Setting

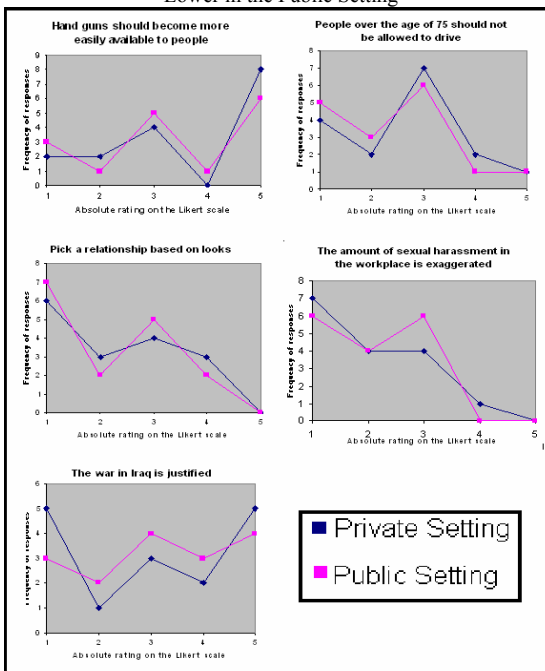


Figure 2. Frequency of responses as a function of controversial Questions that were rated lower in the public than the private setting.

Non-controversial Questions That Were Rated Lower in Both Public Settings

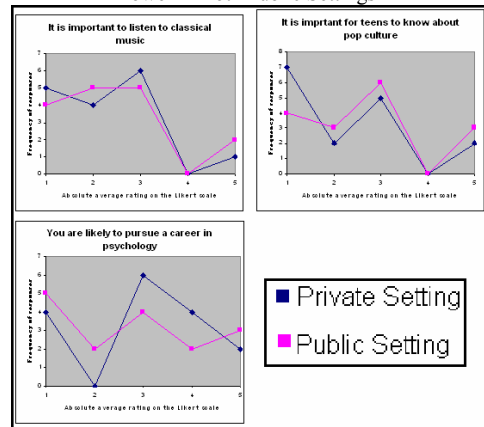


Figure 4. Frequency of responses as a function of non-controversial questions that were rated lower in the public than the private setting.

Non-controversial Questions That Were Rated
 Higher In Both Settings

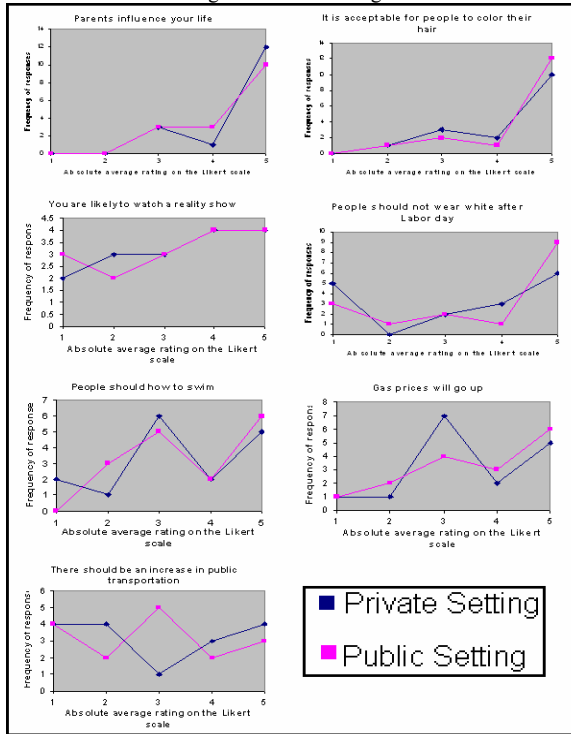


Figure 5. Frequency of responses as a function of non-controversial questions that were rated higher in the public than the private setting.

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