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ABSTRACT

Designed to investigate intra-audience effects in a field setting, this study tested three hypotheses: (1) subjects who are exposed to favorable audience responses by confederates will display more favorable assessments than subjects who are exposed to less favorable responses; (2) subjects who are exposed to favorable audience responses will remain longer than subjects who are exposed to less favorable responses; and (3) subjects who are exposed to favorable responses will indicate a greater desire to return than will subjects who are exposed to less favorable responses. Subjects for the study were 60 students enrolled in four basic communication courses during the summer term of 1974 at Michigan State University. The hypotheses were confirmed. The present study provides evidence for the existence and importance of intra-audience effects in a field setting, although there are some control problems in a field setting. (RB)

INTRA-AUDIENCE EFFECTS: A FIELD TEST

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Communication researchers have conducted a considerable number of "feedback studies" within the last two decades. Investigators, for the most part, have examined the effects of various receiver or audience feedback responses on message sources. The typical research design has manipulated the type (e.g., positive or negative), or the amount of feedback, while measuring the impact of this feedback on source behaviors such as fluency (Stolz and Tannenbaum, 1963; Vlandis, 1964; Blaubaugh, 1969), utterance rate (Miller, Zavos, Vlandis, and Rosenbaum, 1961; Davis, 1967; Karns, 1969), nervousness and eye contact (Amato and Ostermeier, 1967), content change (Karns, 1969), frequency of opinion statements (Verplanck, 1955), and source attitudes such as attitudes toward receivers (Harvey, Kelley, and Shapiro, 1957; Faules, 1967; Huenergardt, 1967), topic (Scott, 1957; Bostrom, Vlandis and Rosenbaum, 1961; Wallace, 1966), and self (Stotland, 1956; Bostrom, 1963; and Gergen, 1965). These studies have demonstrated that audience response does affect communication sources.

Although communication scholars have invested a large amount of energy investigating the effects of audience feedback on message sources, far less attention has been paid to any intra-audience effects resulting from the feedback process. When receivers generate observable responses to a source, these responses are also observable to other audience members. Observable audience responses can result in intra-audience effects as well as having effects on the message source.

Recently a number of studies have begun to investigate the effects of feedback (observable audience response, OAR) on other audience members. Hylton (1971), rather than looking at a receiver-source feedback loop, postulated a receiver-receiver loop. Using confederates in large audiences of about seventy-five persons each, he manipulated audience response, giving naive subject audience members a chance to observe either the positive or negative behaviors of their "peers" in response to a speech. His predictions, that positive observable audience response would result in more favorable attitudes toward the message topic and the speaker than negative response, were supported.

Several other studies have continued this line of research. Monge (1969) used confederates to generate a mixed ratio of positive to negative OAR. His positive condition had a ratio of three confederates responding with positive OAR to every one responding with negative OAR. In the negative condition this ratio was reversed. He also included groups with an equal number of positive and negative responding confederates and a "free" group with no confederates. His results were ambiguous, indicating that subjects in the free group displayed more attitude change than any of the other three groups.

Baptiste (1969) had confederates introduced to the subject audience as experts on the message topic. These confederates then sat at the front of the room and generated either positive or negative responses to the speech. Contrary to her prediction, she found negative OAR resulting in

more favorable attitudes toward the message topic and higher ratings of speaker credibility than positive OAR. The subjects perhaps resented the negative OAR being overtly given to a speaker who was also a student, by the non-student "experts." This resentment could have accounted for the obtained boomerang effect.

Hocking (1972) examined one-to-many speaking situations in which audience members were initially hostile or friendly, and gradually as they heard and evaluated a speech, changed their attitudes and feedback behaviors. By sequentially manipulating OAR from positive to negative and vice-versa during a speech, he expected to find a contrast effect creating more positive attitude change in the negative-to-positive condition than when the response was positive throughout. Similarly the positive-to-negative treatment was expected to result in less change in the direction advocated by the message than response which was negative throughout. Contrary to these predictions, subjects rated credibility higher and were more favorable toward the message topic when OAR was positive throughout than when it began negative and then gradually became positive. Hocking did provide a replication of Hylton's (1971) original findings when he compared the all-positive with the all-negative group.

Margreiter, Hocking, and Hylton (1974) examined intra-audience effects in dyads and triads. A single confederate generated either positive, negative or no OAR and was able to effect, in the predicted directions, the subject's attitudes toward the message topic and their assessments of speaker credibility.

Each of these studies has demonstrated the existence of intra-audience effects resulting from feedback. However, each of them has been conducted in laboratory settings. Criticism of laboratory experiments in communication is well known and need not be reviewed in detail here. Redding (1970) points out that the "oft-repeated charge is that the laboratory experiment is somehow too artificial, too far removed from real life to permit valid generalization from more or less trivial phenomena in the laboratory to the really important events of the world outside" (p. 127). This criticism applies to the OAR research reviewed above. Hocking (1972), for example, provided his subjects with no explanation for why they were going to another classroom to hear a speech "on an important topic." Once they arrived in the room and the speech began, the extremity of the audience response manipulation to which the subjects were exposed was of considerably greater magnitude than would normally occur in a classroom setting. In the positive conditions the confederates several times interrupted the speech with applause. In the negative conditions many of the confederates ignored the speaker entirely, carried on their own conversations, wandered around the room, and so on. These sorts of behaviors certainly would be construed by subjects as positive and negative, respectively, but they were clearly more extreme and probably inappropriate for norms which exist in classroom situations. Hocking (1972) wanted to make his manipulation a strong one to maximize the likelihood of obtaining the differences in attitude change and assessments of speaker credibility which were predicted. However, he did this at the expense of losing realism. If an effect is so subtle that it can be found only under conditions which would rarely or

never occur in the "real" world, questions about its import should legitimately be raised. Writes Clevenger (1969):

> . . . if an effect is so slight that it cannot be observed in a natural setting, then it is perhaps not worth the investment of substantial time and resources in experimental research. . . . (p. 157).

In response to criticisms such as these, the present study was designed to investigate intra-audience effects in a naturalistic field setting. The setting which was selected was a bar which featured rock and roll music. It was felt that in this context, fairly overt and extreme responses by members of the audience to a band are normal and realistic. This research was designed to test the following hypotheses:

H_1: Subjects who are exposed to favorable audience responses by confederates will display more favorable assessments of the quality of the band than will the subjects who are exposed to less favorable responses.

H_2: Subjects who are exposed to favorable audience responses will stay longer at the bar than will subjects who are exposed to less favorable responses.

H_3: Subjects who are exposed to favorable responses will indicate a greater desire to see the band again than will subjects who are exposed to less favorable responses.

METHOD

Overview: Subjects were required as part of a bogus class assignment to go to a bar and "observe communication behaviors in the field." Half the subjects attended one Thursday night and half attended the following Thursday. The same band played both nights and they had been inspructed to play the same songs in the same way on both nights. A group of about 30 confederates attended both nights, one night giving "negative" responses to the band and the other night giving "positive" responses. Subjects filled out a questionnaire in their classes which met the Friday following their participation.

Subjects: Subjects were about 60 students enrolled in four basic communication courses during the summer term of 1974 at Michigan State University. They were assigned at random in intact classes to one of the two conditions. Of the sixty subjects, about fifteen failed to show up in class on the day after the experiment, and consequently could not fill out the dependent measure questionnaire, two failed to properly fill out the questionnaire, and one knew one of the confederates and subsequently found out about the experiment and was dropped from the analysis. This left 42 questionnaires: twenty-two in the positive condition and twenty in the negative condition.

Confederates: Confederates were 30 students enrolled in the senior author's persuasion class.

Stimulus: The stimulus was provided by a rock and roll band[1] which played every Thursday night in a bar near campus. The band was aware this study was being conducted and they agreed to play the same songs both nights and to attempt to hold their delivery as constant as possible. Keeping the band naive may have had certain advantages from a realism standpoint but the additional control provided by having the band play the same music both nights was a more important consideration.

Procedure: Subjects in each of the four classes were given a bogus assignment for which they could receive extra credit. The assignment required them to go to the bar on a specified night and "infiltrate and observe communication behavior." They were led to believe that they would later be writing a paper on their observations. They were given a long list of suggestions for things they might look for in the bar setting. For example, they were told they might observe: "Non-verbal cues that people use to indicate that they are or are not interested in the advance or a potential interactant"; "What variables affect communication patterns"; and so on. In order to minimize the effect of this assignment on cueing them to the behavior of the confederates, subjects were told to make their observations during the band's breaks. They were told that it was important for everyone in their class to go to the same bar on the same night so that everyone would have the same "behavioral base" for their observations. They were told that the band began playing at 10 P.M. and that they should arrive inconspicuously in small groups between 9:30 and 10:30 and that they could leave whenever they wanted if they felt they had made enough observations on which to base their paper. Maximum capacity in this bar is 200. The bar was nearly full on both nights of the experiment.

The confederates also infiltrated the bar unobtrusively. On the first night they gave only minimal response to the band. They were instructed to try and look as if they did not enjoy the music. They did not applaud or dance. For the most part they just ignored the band and generally tried to respond as if they had a low evaluation of the quality of the music. On the second night they had been instructed to respond as positively as they could. In class that day, members of the band discussed with them what typical positive responses in that bar were. In the positive condition confederates applauded enthusiastically, danced at times, shouted for an encore at the end, and generally tried to respond as if they had a high evaluation of the quality of the music. Care was taken to assure that all manipulated responses were within norms for appropriate behavior in this situation.

Dependent measure: The questionnaire was filled out in class on the two Fridays subsequent to the particular class's participation the night before. The questionnaire was designed to look like something the class instructor had just thrown together. The purported purpose of the questionnaire was to "get some information which will help in our discussion of your observations at the bar." The dependent measures consisted of 11-point scales on which the subjects indicated their evaluation of the quality of the band, how enjoyable they had found their trip to the bar, and

how much they would like to see this particular band again. They were also asked to estimate when they arrived and when they left, and whether they had ever seen the band before.[2]

Manipulation check: The success of the manipulation of audience response was assessed in two ways. The dependent measure questionnaire included an item which asked the subjects to assess "how much they felt others who were there liked the band." Second, three individuals, who were naive to the research entirely, were in attendance at the bar both nights. They were instructed to meet and synchronize their watches before going to the bar. They then sat in three separate places and every fifteen minutes made an independent assessment of the audience response at that point in time.

Debriefing: After all subjects had completed the questionnaire, the senior author went into the classes and fully explained all aspects of the research to the subjects. Several probes were used to try and determine whether any subjects were suspicious of the situation and none were. Many subjects indicated that they had enjoyed participation and none expressed bad feeling about the deception involved, even when asked directly if such feelings existed.

Statistical analysis: All hypotheses were tested with one-tailed t tests.[3]

RESULTS

Manipulation of the independent variable: Both measures of the success of the manipulation indicated that it was highly successful. Subjects in the negative condition indicated that they felt other people there liked the band significantly less than did subjects in the positive condition. (Negative $\bar{x} = 7.64$, Positive $\bar{x} = 8.95$, $t = 2.87$, $df = 40$, $p < .005$; possible range 0 to 10).

The intercoder reliability of the three naive audience rater observers ranged from .56 to .87 with a mean of .73. They indicated a mean audience response on the negative night of 2.93 and a mean response of 5.40 on the positive night (possible range 0 to 10).

Dependent variables: Subjects in the positive condition had a mean evaluation of the quality of the band of 7.90 as compared with a mean of 6.73 for negative subjects ($t = 1.91$, $df = 40$, $p < .05$). Subjects in the negative condition indicated they would like to see the band again less than subjects in the positive condition. This difference approached but failed to reach conventional significance levels (Positive $\bar{x} = 7.42$, Negative $\bar{x} = 5.96$, $t = 1.64$, $df = 40$, $.05 > p < .10$).

Subjects in the positive condition stayed significantly longer at the bar than did subjects in the negative condition. Those in the positive condition stayed a mean of 156.25 minutes compared with a mean of

127.73 minutes for those in the negative condition ($t = 1.93$, $df = 40$, $p < .05$). Table I below summarizes these results.

TABLE I

Means, t values, p values, and degrees of freedom for all hypotheses.

	Neg.	Pos.	Difference	t	p	df
Evaluation of the overall quality of the band*	6.73	7.90	1.17	1.91	<.05	40
Would like to see this band again*	5.96	7.42	1.46	1.64	<.10	40
Mean number of minutes stayed	127.73	156.25	28.52	1.93	<.05	40
How much others liked the band-manipulation check*	7.64	8.95	1.31	2.87	<.005	40

* The possible range was 0 to 10 with higher scores representing more favorable evaluations.

DISCUSSION

Several rival hypotheses, while unlikely, cannot be completely ruled out as possible explanations for the results of this study. It is possible that the individual subjects in the classes which were assigned to the negative condition were a priori less fond of rock and roll music in general than those in the positive condition and it could have been this which accounted for their lower appraisal of the band. A pretest would have provided data bearing on this possibility, but it also might have sensitized subjects to the manipulation.

Another possibility is that the band may have simply played better on the positive response night. There is clear evidence, much of it cited in this paper, that communication sources are profoundly affected by feedback. It seems unlikely, though, that since the band did play the same music both nights, that there could have been that much variance in their play.[4]

Two potential problems exist in interpreting the results of hypothesis 3. (Length of time subjects stayed at the bar on the two nights.) The measure used was a self report by subjects. The audience response manipulation may have affected the subjects' subjective impressions of how long they had stayed. However, if this indeed occurred, it seems likely that the subjects who would have tended to underestimate the length of their

stay would be those in the positive condition (time passes quickly when you're having fun) and this would have gone the opposite of the prediction and the results. A second problem is that the band played an encore song on the positive night and people may have stayed longer on this night simply because the band played longer. However, this possibility too seems unlikely, since subjects stayed an average of almost thirty minutes longer on the positive night and the band played only about ten minutes longer on this night.

The fact that the results of this study are consistent with the general pattern of results obtained in the earlier laboratory OAR research cited previously adds additional credence to the conclusion that it was the manipulation of the independent variable which caused the observed difference in the dependent variables and not one of these alternative hypotheses.

With these qualifications in mind, this experiment still provides good evidence that intra-audience effects can be demonstrated in naturalistic field settings. Two of the three hypotheses were supported and the third hypothesis was marginally supported. Audience members are affected by the responses of other audience members. Their evaluation of communication messages and sources is in part a result of the evaluations and observable responses of those around them when the message is received.

Exactly how does OAR influence other receivers? Some writers make a distinction between the "intellectualist" and the "affective" tendencies of social influence (Tajfel, 1968). In a similar vein others talk about a need for information or a need for status in terms of social influence (Cohen, 1964). In Asch's (1956) classic conformity research, subjects were pressured to act in concert with the group. Subsequent interviews with them revealed that few of them actually believed the group's judgements were correct, but they conformed anyway. Graham (1962) suggests that if "it really mattered" to subjects that they be right, they would have made the correct decisions. Asch's subjects were probably more influenced by the affective tendencies of social influence than by the need for information. They had all the information they needed to make the correct decisions: they made wrong ones for other reasons.

In this experiment this was not the case. Subjects did not state their judgements publicly, nor was there a clear right or wrong judgement. The observable responses of the other audience members probably served an information function. The responses of other audience members provided the subjects with additional information on which to base their evaluations of the band.

Intra-audience effects research continues to be a promising area of concern for communication scientists. Furture research should be aimed at developing more complete theoretic rationales for the phenomenon. Attribution theory, for example, has received a great deal of recent attention and may prove to be a useful perspective from which to examine intra-audience effects (see Jones, Kanouse, Kelley, Nisbett, Valins, and Weiner, 1972). This approach would involve examining the variables which

result in audience members perceiving different causes for the observable responses of other audience members. For example, negative feedback to a speech could be attributed to disagreement with the position advanced by the speech, boredom with the speech itself or the speaker's delivery, disrespect or dislike for the speaker, or even an upset stomach in the person giving the response. The cause to which audience members attributed the feedback behavior of other audience members could affect the impact this behavior had on them. A careful specification of situational characteristics and other variables which resulted in differing causal attributions for OAR may well be a useful approach.

The control necessary to do this kind of research would probably require a return to the laboratory. Since the present study has provided evidence for the existence and importance of intra-audience effects in a naturalistic field setting, we now feel more comfortable in doing this.

FOOTNOTES

1. "The Woolies" served as the stimulus band.

2. The stimulus band has been together for seven years and they have played at many high schools in the state. Fifteen subjects indicated that they had seen this band before, but it was determined during the debriefing that most of these subjects had seen them several years earlier. Their responses on the questionnaire did not differ significantly from subjects who had never seen the band before and their data is included in the analysis.

3. A problem with this analysis is that since it was intact classes which were assigned randomly to conditions, and not individuals, using the individual as the unit of analysis violates the assumption of the independence of observations. Unfortunately it was not logistically feasible to assign individuals at random to conditions. Even if this had been possible, the independence problem would still exist (in a less serious form) because the treatments happened to all subjects within a condition at the same time. The reader is alerted to the shortcoming of this analysis.

4. Since this band was so experienced (see footnote 2) they had performed before a large number of audiences and experienced many different degrees of response. Consequently it is unlikely that their delivery would have been severely affected by the manipulated audience response, especially since they were aware that confederates were generating much of the response.

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