

Dr. Adam Potthast

LE300

27 April 2016

Is Laughter Contagious?

Laughter is a special gift that is a social construct that brings people together. Without laughter the world would be a little more dull and uninteresting place to live. When studying humor and the ethics of laughter one area that stood out was the concept that laughter can be a contagious entity. Laughter is a unique aspect to human beings and is a necessity for living a fulfilled, happy lifestyle. With this there is something to be said for the fact that laughter like many other things can be “caught” from others. This is done in social settings, through social media, and even television. Laughter is a quality that many people desire to have, so when one person is seen with the said quality, many want to image that.

History

When looking more closely at the question of whether or not laughter is contagious understanding the history of this concept was the first discipline to be looked at. Laughing uncontrollably and the idea of “catching” someone else’s laughter is something that was seen in Tanganyika (modern day Tanzania) with the Laughter Epidemic of 1962 that occurred there. This began at the mission school for girls and the laughter began with three girls that were so uncontrollable that it spread to about one hundred other girls in the school. The laughter was so distracting that the school was forced to close for three days. During this time the

laughter then spread to nearby villages and had a huge impact on the people around this area (Provine). This epidemic was something that occurred just the by the start of a few girls laughing.

For many it is hard to believe that something such as laughter can cause such an outbreak among such a large group of people. As people have looked into what happened in Tanganyika all those years ago, it has shown that the laughter these people were experiencing might have been due to a stress factor (Hempelmann). What caused this laughter is not exactly known, it may have been a joke but one thing that has been discovered because of this is this type of “mass hysteria” and it is now known as MPI, Mass Psychogenic Illness (Hempelmann). This is seen in classes of low status and more common for people who are struggling or living in poverty. Which in many ways people do say that laughter is the best medicine for the body and soul, and this could be a way to prove just that. These people in Tanganyika probably needed this laughter for themselves and it could have been a stress relief. The fact that this laughter also spread so rapidly among people just shows how laughter can be seen as contagious.

Biology of Laughter and Contagion

Digging deeper into the second discipline, the biology of laughter and the factors that influence why people laugh and how it spreads to others is very interesting. First looking at the body and how laughter can affect different parts of the body, such as the rib cage. In the rib cage this is where breathing, talking, and even laughing forms. Sophia Scott, a neurologist did a study on laughter and the affect it has on the body and other people. She began by looking into the rib cage, the

patterns that were seen in a study of breathing, which was at a slow pace and not fluctuating too much. Then looking at the rib cage when a person is talking, was seen to have some movement but still at a steady pace. Then when laughter was looked at the scale was all over the place and the movement had no pattern at all. It was interesting to see the difference between the three and how it can affect the rib cage so much so.

Furthermore, this type of laughter, which is seen as heavy and convulsive laughter, that is uncontrollable. Sophie Schott states that there are two roots to all laughter, voluntary and involuntary laughter. Both are seen in the body and in the social context. Voluntary laughter is the type of laughter that is seen in social settings, having simple conversations where laughter is seen as complimentary. Involuntary laughter is what is known as “real laughter” the kind of laughter that you know is just so funny it is uncontrollable (Scott). Taking a look at the brain done by Sophie Scott, she shows the different areas of the brain that light up when someone laughs voluntarily and involuntarily. When someone was laughing voluntarily it was seen that the brain was working harder in certain areas to pick up on why that person was laughing. The brain is trying to figure out why this person is laughing, what is funny, and the response they should have. This is heard laughter, when one is laughing in a social setting. Involuntary laughter was seen when someone was genuinely laughing to the “convulsion” stage. When looking at the brain this time it was seen that the person was not thinking so hard about what and why something was funny, but rather just laughing at what was funny.

The word contagion can have many different meanings. Finding something to be contagious is like thinking of something to have a relation to a medical disease or illness. But thinking of the word contagious, I know that doesn't mean that everything must be related to sickness. It was interesting to see if there were other definitions of the word contagious. Looking at the word contagion it was seen that the definition that more closely related to that topic being studied here was said to be, "The contagiousness of laughter, the tendency to laugh in response to perceived laughter..." (Provine). This definition closely relates to the idea of voluntary laughter and how people can catch laughter from "perceived laughter".

Psychology

Moreover, the third discipline that was studied here was psychology, and this is an important aspect to look at because studying the social play in laughter is a necessity. When studying psychology it usually is from the standpoint of a more "morbid" view. This is because in psychology what is typically being studied in the brain comes from mental illness and different areas such as that. Laughter has recently been understood to benefit people from the thought that they can be "healed" by laughter. This goes back to the idea of the schoolgirls from Tanganyika who not only just needed to laugh but they mentally could not stop it.

Looking at the dynamics of laughter psychologists found that people were thirty times more likely to laugh, a heavy "real" laughter when they were in a group setting (Provine). In order to catch the contagiousness of laughter it is easier to do so with people who know how to laugh involuntarily. This is the type of laughter that needs to be done in order for it to become so contagious.

In a group set it is important for people to become aware of these two forms of laughter, voluntary and involuntary because this is when people begin to understand social queues. Knowing the difference between voluntary and involuntary laughter is important because when people get together and simply laugh, it shows that they understand one another, agree with each other, and like them (Scott). In many ways this can show other people how similar they are with each other and this is how people begin making personal connections. Understanding the way people think and communicate with one another is an important aspect to think about when studying the laughter of people. Knowing how to laugh in certain situations and environments can benefit people when understand whether or not voluntary laughter or involuntary laughter is needed.

Looking at these three disciplines, history, biology and contagiousness, and psychology I asked myself, "so what?". Does their even need to be an answer to the question of whether laughter is contagious or not? It is evident that there are many ways to explain how laughter can be contagious. The most prominent portion of the paper was centered around the concept of involuntary laughter, this being the "real" laughter that people experience. In conclusion the answer to the question "Is laughter contagious?" is yes, laughter is something that is indeed contagious and should be spread to everyone, because the joy that comes with laughing is needed amongst people especially in this day and age.

Works Cited

Hempelmann, C. F. (2007). The laughter of the 1962 Tanganyika 'laughter epidemic'.

Humor – International Journal of Humor Research, 20(1).

doi:10.1515/humor.2007.003

Palomares, N. A. (2012). When and How Goals Are Contagious in Social Interaction.

Human Communication Research, 39(1), 74-100. doi:10.1111/j.1468-

2958.2012.01439.x

Provine, R. (1996, January). Laughter. *American Scientist*, 1-6.

Provine, R. R. (2004). Laughing, Tickling, and the Evolution of Speech and Self.

Current Directions in Psychological Science Current Directions in Psychol Sci,

13(6), 215-218. doi:10.1111/j.0963-7214.2004.00311.x

Scott, S. (2015, March). Why we laugh. Retrieved April 13, 2016, from

https://www.ted.com/talks/sophie_scott_why_we_laugh#t-605488