



Laughter conveys status



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Low- and high-status individuals laughed in qualitatively different ways
- High-status individuals displayed more dominant and fewer submissive laughs
- Aggressive contexts promoted more dominant and less submissive laughter
- Low-status individuals laughed differently depending on context
- The sound of laughter influenced naïve observers' perceptions of the laugher's status

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 August 2013

Revised 5 April 2016

Accepted 20 April 2016

Available online 27 April 2016

Keywords:

Laughter

Status

Social perception

Nonverbal behavior

Thin slices

ABSTRACT

We propose that status influences individuals' use of dominant versus submissive laughter, and that individuals are conferred status based on the way they laugh. In Study 1, naturally occurring laughter was observed while low- and high-status individuals teased one another. The use of dominant and submissive laughter corresponded to hierarchical variables: High-status individuals and teasers displayed more dominant, disinhibited laughs, whereas low-status individuals and targets of teases displayed more submissive, inhibited laughs. Further, low-status individuals were more likely to vary the form of their laughter between contexts than high-status individuals. Study 2 demonstrated that laughter influences perceptions of status by naïve observers. Individuals who laughed dominantly were afforded higher status than individuals who laughed submissively, regardless of their actual status. Moreover, low-status laughers were perceived to be significantly higher in status, and to have as much status as high-status laughers, when laughing dominantly versus submissively. Finally, exploratory analyses suggest that the positive emotional reactions of observers of laughter can help explain the link between laugh type and status perceptions.

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1. Introduction

Perceptions of status—the prestige, rank, admiration, and respect afforded within one's group—are typically accurate within existing groups, wherein members know each other well and observe multiple interactions between various members (Anderson, Srivastava, Beer, Spataro, & Chatman, 2006). However, much less is known about how individuals make inferences about status in zero-acquaintance situations. In this paper, we investigate how status is communicated in laughter. First, we examine whether social status influences how individuals laugh. Second, we test whether individuals can change how others perceive their status by using different forms of laughter. Third, we

examine whether and how both of these relationships are moderated by contextual factors.

Laughter is an important behavior to study because it is a rich and variable form of communication (Bachorowski & Owren, 2001; Bachorowski, Smoski, & Owren, 2001) that is ubiquitous, occurring in over 95% of conversations (Provine & Fischer, 1989). Individuals laugh in many ways, and for many reasons: We laugh when amused, to signal agreement, or simply because others are laughing. Certain types of laughter elicit positive affect in others, whereas other types do not (Bachorowski & Owren, 2001). Variations in the sound of laughter communicate specific emotions and intentions (Gervais & Wilson, 2005). However, despite laughter's ubiquity in social interaction, its social functions are not well understood.

Examining whether individuals communicate status through laughter is promising because of laughter's metacommunicative function as a disarming signal of cooperation, cohesion, safety, and jest

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(Bachorowski & Owren, 2001; Keltner, 2009). Laughing in the presence of others indicates the interaction is safe (Grammer, 1990). For this reason, laughter is often used before, during, or after an act of verbal aggression to make the intention more ambiguous or less serious; such laughter signals “this is play” (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Grammer, 1990; Grammer & Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1990; Van Hooff, 1972). The use of laughter to disarm aggression is often volitional and strategic (Gervais & Wilson, 2005; Owren & Bachorowski, 2003). While the norms of most social groups prevent direct, unambiguous acts of aggression and dominance, the use of laughter may free individuals to display dominance because laughter renders the act less serious.

In this way, laughter may also provide a context for the negotiation of status, giving low-status individuals the opportunity to try on high-status roles. Individuals high in status and/or power tend to display particular patterns of nonverbal behavior, including increased expressivity and decreased interpersonal distance (Hall, Coats, & Smith LeBeau, 2005; Kraus & Keltner, 2009). Whereas overt displays of high-status-like behavior from low-status individuals are often punished (Anderson, Ames, & Gosling, 2008), we propose that the context of laughter may allow low-status individuals to display dominance without facing a potential backlash.

2. Overview of studies

We investigated three research questions regarding the relationship between status and laughter. First, in Study 1, we examined whether high- and low-status individuals laugh differently. According to approach–inhibition theory (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003), higher status often leads to higher power, a psychological state associated with behavioral disinhibition. Application of this theory to the present research leads to two potential hypotheses. First, high-status individuals may simply laugh more than low-status individuals. A second hypothesis, however, is that status affects not the overall amount of laughter but rather the type of laughter: High-status individuals should be more likely to display expressive, disinhibited laughs, whereas low-status individuals should be more likely to display constrained, inhibited laughs. Given the great variability in types of laughs and the different messages they convey (e.g., Bachorowski & Owren, 2001; Gervais & Wilson, 2005), and given that a recent meta-analysis found no relationship between overall amount of laughter and hierarchical position or rank (Hall et al., 2005), we considered the second possibility more likely. To test this, coders identified laughs that communicated dominance or submissiveness, and we tested whether status influenced their production. Different coders rated the laughs' characteristics to examine how dominant and submissive laughs differ acoustically.

Second, we examined whether contextual factors influence the way a person laughs, and how these factors interact with a person's status in shaping laughter, using a pre-existing dataset including naturally occurring laughs in an ecologically valid setting—interactions in which high- and low-status members of a hierarchical group (a fraternity) took turns teasing and being teased by each other (Keltner, Young, Heerey, Oemig, & Monarch, 1998). Teasing is an ambiguous context involving both aggression and play (Keltner, Capps, Kring, Young, & Heerey, 2001) so laughter may play an important clarifying role. Multiple theories predict that individuals of lower rank or status should display more behavioral variability between contexts than individuals of higher rank or status (e.g., Keltner et al., 2003; Magee & Smith, 2013; but see Guinote, 2007, 2008; Kraus et al., 2014; for important qualifying conditions). Thus, we predicted that low-status individuals would shift the form of their laughter more between the roles of teaser and target than high-status individuals.

Third, in Study 2, we examined whether dominant and submissive laughs influence perceived status. Here, naïve observers rated the fraternity brothers' status after listening to their laughs. If low-status individuals can elevate their status by adopting the laugh styles of high-status individuals, such a finding would be a unique characteristic

of laughter given that perceivers are normally sensitive to status indicators (Anderson, Hildreth, & Howland, 2015; Smith & Magee, 2015) and punish those who behave “beyond their rank” (Anderson et al., 2008).

2.1. Study 1

To assess how status and hierarchical context influence laughter, we analyzed spontaneous laughter occurring while low- and high-status fraternity brothers took turns teasing (as “teaser”) and being teased by (as “target”) each other—a task meant to make status salient. After one team of coders identified all laughs, a second team identified whether each laugh conveyed dominance, submissiveness, or neither, and a third team judged the laughs' acoustic properties. We analyzed whether a laugher's status and his temporary role as teaser or target influenced the amount and type of laughter produced.

3. Method

3.1. Participants and procedure

Forty-eight male members of a U.S. public university fraternity were randomly assigned to one of 12 groups of four, each consisting of two low-status members (“pledges” who had joined the fraternity one month prior) and two high-status members (active in the fraternity for at least two years). To heighten status distinctions, low-status members were seated next to one high-status member and directly across from the other high-status member.

Each group was videotaped as they engaged in a round-robin teasing task, during which each member teased and was teased by each of the other three members. Teasers generated nicknames for targets based on randomly generated sets of initials (e.g., L.I. became “Loser Idiot”) and then told teasing stories about why they chose each nickname. Participants were instructed to speak and act naturally while telling their stories.

3.2. Coding of dominant and submissive laughs

Two coders identified each instance of laughter (agreement = 94%; disagreements resolved by discussion) from the videos, including laughs occurring through speech. The teasing paradigm elicited numerous spontaneous laughs (see Table 1). A separate team of two coders, blind to study hypotheses and laugher status, independently watched each group's entire interaction and judged how submissive to dominant each laugh was ($\alpha = .97$) on a scale of -3 (*definitely submissive*) to 3 (*definitely dominant*). These ratings were then transformed into a categorical classification. Laughs receiving average ratings of two or higher were classified as dominant, whereas laughs receiving average ratings of -2 or lower were classified as submissive.

3.3. Coding of laugh characteristics

A third team of two coders, blind to hypotheses, laugher status, and laugher role, listened to each laugh without any accompanying video,

Table 1
Descriptive statistics for laughs in Study 1.

Overall statistics	Total	Percentage
All laughs	694	100%
Dominant laughs	235	34%
Submissive laughs	167	24%
Neither submissive nor dominant	292	42%
By participant	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
All laughs	14.48	6.77
Dominant laughs	4.90	3.84
Submissive laughs	3.48	3.63

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