

Sharing Makes Both Good and Bad Experiences More Intense

October 07, 2014



Undergoing an experience with another person — even if we do it in silence, with someone we met just moments ago — seems to intensify that experience, according to new [research](#) published in *Psychological Science*. The research shows that people who share experiences with another person rate those experiences as more pleasant or unpleasant than those who undergo the experience on their own.

“We often think that what matters in social life is being together with others, but we’ve found it also really matters what those people are *doing*,” says psychological scientist and lead researcher Erica Boothby of Yale University.

“When people are paying attention to the same pleasant thing, whether the Mona Lisa or a song on the radio, our research shows that the experience is much more pleasurable. And the reverse is true of unpleasant experiences — not sharing them makes them more pleasurable, while sharing them makes them worse.”

Thinking about shared experiences like going to the movies or viewing art in museums, Boothby and Yale colleagues Margaret Clark and John Bargh wanted to explore the consequences of sharing

experiences that unfold socially but silently.

In their first study, 23 female college students came to the lab and met another participant who would be completing the study at the same time. Unbeknownst to the students, the “other participant” was actually part of the research team and she always played the role of the second participant in the study.

The pair was told that they would engage in several activities, including tasting chocolate and looking at a booklet of paintings, side by side at a table. They were told they would be assigned to complete the activities in random order but, in reality, the student was always only assigned to taste the two chocolates, one at the same time as the second participant and the other while the second participant was looking at the booklet. After the student tasted both chocolates, the experiment ended “early” before they got a chance to look at the artwork.

Although the chocolate samples were presented as two different chocolates, they were actually squares taken from the same bar of 70% dark chocolate.

Students reported liking the chocolate they had tasted at the same time as the other participant more than the chocolate they had tasted while the other participant was looking at the booklet. Although the chocolate pieces were identical, the students tended to report the “shared” chocolate as being more flavorful, which suggests that the mere act of sharing may influence how things are actually sensed or perceived by us.

To find out whether sharing makes any experience more pleasant or actually intensifies specific feelings (positive or negative), the researchers tasked another group of students to taste a bitter “chocolate substitute” (really just 90% dark chocolate, which pre-testing revealed to be unpleasant).

This time, the students said that they liked the “shared” chocolate less. They also reported feeling more absorbed in the tasting experience and more in tune with the other participant when they tasted the chocolates at the same time.

The researchers suggest that sharing an experience with someone else, even silently, may focus our attention, making us more attuned to what we are sensing and perceiving.

“When people think of shared experience, what usually comes to mind is being with close others, such as friends or family, and talking with them,” says Boothby. “We don’t realize the extent to which we are influenced by people around us whom we don’t know and aren’t even communicating with.”

Ultimately, these findings may have significant implications for social life in a world that is filled with distractors:

“We text friends while at a party, check our Twitter feed while out to dinner, and play Sudoku while watching TV with family — without meaning to, we are unsharing experiences with the people around us,” says Boothby. “A pleasant experience that goes unshared is a missed opportunity to focus on the activity we and others are doing and give it a boost.”