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Abstract

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Major: Psychology

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Laughing When Uncomfortable: A Novel Method to Induce Nervous Laughter

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In the conclusion of his landmark study of obedience, Milgram (1963) indicated that approximately 35% of participants subtly laughed when told to deliver an extreme shock to another individual. Milgram indicated that this form of laugher deserves future study, yet there has been very little research on nervous laughter (i.e., laughter in response to uncomfortable social situations). The present research combines evolutionary and social explanations of general laughter to explain why humans engage in the more specific form of nervous laughter. This research is centered on an experimental manipulation that is hypothesized to elicit nervous laughter.
Specifically, participants' frustration levels will be experimentally manipulated by being asked to solve either a solvable or unsolvable puzzle. A social interaction will then be used to put the participant in a situation where they lack control. A person of authority then announces a rudimentary error that is intended to induce confusion and surprise. After this interaction, the researcher will supply a second puzzle, which is also randomly assigned to be solvable or unsolvable. It was hypothesized that individuals in the unsolvable/unsolvable condition will laugh the most followed by the solvable/solvable group. Individuals in the solvable/unsolvable and unsolvable/solvable groups will exhibit laughter at similar rates, but this rate is expected to be less than the other groups. The first stage of data collection has been completed and while there were differing rates of laughter between all of the experimental conditions, the hypothesized results were incorrect. Overall rates of laughter regardless of condition was 32%.