

# Effect of Humor on Hitchhiking: A Field Experiment

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Studies have shown that a positive mood, activated by an amusing drawing, leads to increased helping behavior. Four hitchhiking confederates, 2 young men and 2 young women, tested 1600 motorists. Each confederate held a sign indicating the place where he/she wished to go. In half of the cases, a funny drawing (a smiling face) appeared on the sign. Contrary to my expectations, the funny drawing inhibited the helping behavior of the motorists, but only when the hitchhiker was a woman.

Multiple studies have shown that a positive mood is more conducive to helping behavior than a neutral mood (Bizman, Yinin, Ronco & Schachar, 1980; Forgas, 1997; 1998; Harris & Smith, 1975; Job, 1987; Levin & Isen, 1975; Rind, 1997; Weyant, 1978). This positive mood can be activated in many different ways and usually does not require elaborate tools. A false attribution of success or failure in a task activates a positive/negative mood, which, in turn, affects altruism in a way which is congruent with the mood (Clark & Waddell, 1986). Finding a coin in a phone booth or on the ground is enough to induce a positive mood, which in return enhances altruism (Batson, Coke, Chard, Smith & Talaferro, 1979; Blevins & Murphy, 1974; Kidd & Marshall, 1982; Isen & Levin, 1972; Isen & Simmonds, 1978; Levin & Isen, 1975). To be offered candy or a cookie produces the same effect (Harris & Smith, 1975; Isen & Levin, 1972).

Other environmental factors also activate a positive mood, which affects pro-social behavior. For example, the amount of money in tips given by customers increases on sunny days (Cunningham, 1979). A study by Rind (1996) showed that information about the weather, given by the waiter to customers who had not yet seen the color of the sky, was sufficient to make his tip vary. Customers left the waiter a large or a small tip depending on whether he told them it was sunny or rainy. Pleasant ambient smells (e.g. baking, cooking, roasting coffee) in a shopping mall led the passers-by to provide change for a dollar to a same-sex confederate more readily than in the absence of such odors (Baron, 1997). Pleasant music also plays an important part in helping behavior.

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Fried and Berkowitz (1979) found that subjects who heard soothing music for seven minutes were more apt to accept a request for help made immediately afterwards by the experimenter than subjects in a no-music condition. Another way of inducing a mood state in a subject consists of exposing him or her to pleasant versus unpleasant pictures or texts (Forgas, 1997, 1998). For example, drawing a smiling face on the bill increased the amount of tip money given to a waitress (Rind & Bordia, 1996). In the same way, a hand-made drawing of the sun ("smiley-face"), added to the bottom of the bill of customers having a drink, led them to leave a larger tip for the waiters or waitresses (Gueguen & LeGohérel, 2000). Attaching a small card to the bill onto which a joke was appended produced the same effect (Gueguen, in press).

In the present study a new evaluation of the effect of a drawing was made in conjunction with one of the standard requests for help: hitchhiking. It is known that, in this context, traditional factors of influence lead to increased helping behavior. For instance, Snyder, Grether, and Keller (1974) and Morgan, Lockard, Fahrenbrugh and Smith (1975) have shown that motorists are more likely to stop if hitchhikers look at them straight in the face than if they look somewhere else. The effect of eye contact on various helping behaviors has been observed in several studies (Brockner, Pressman, Cabrit, & Moran, 1982; Bull, & Gibson-Robinson, 1981; Hornik & Ellis, 1988; Kleinke, 1980). Craswell, Gordon and Tedford (1972) also found that a male hitchhiker is more likely to get help when he is well-dressed. Similarly, several studies have shown that people were more likely to respond to a request for help made by solicitors who were well-dressed (Goodman & Garais, 1993; Kleinke, 1977; McElroy & Morrow, 1994). Pomazal and Clore (1973) found that drivers were more likely to help a hitchhiker in a high need situation (e.g.: when the hitchhiker confederate had a physical disability). So, in keeping with Rind and Bordia's (1996) study, I expected a "smiley" face drawing placed on the sign indicating the hitchhiker's destination, would increase the rate of drivers who would stop to help the solicitor.

Because research on hitchhiking has shown that females receive more rides than males (Clifford & Cleary, 1971; Pomazal & Clore, 1973; Morgan et al., 1975; Snyder et al., 1974), it was expected that female hitchhikers would receive more help in the present experiment.

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants were 1600 drivers, men and women, solicited at the entry of a famous peninsula ("Presqu'île de Rhuy's") of Brittany in France. The peninsula is about 24 kilometers long.

### Procedure

Four people, 2 men and 2 women, 19-21 years old, served as confederates in this experiment. All of them were first year students from the Department of Business at the University of Bretagne-Sud in France, and all volunteered to participate as confederates in this experiment. Both female and male confederates were selected by 2 other male and 2 other female evaluators who were asked to select confederates based on their physical attractiveness. These evaluators were instructed to carefully examine photographs of students and to select people, males and females, who were average in attractiveness. After that, these students were asked to participate in the experiment. All of them accepted the solicitation of the experimenter. One confederate stood at the side of the road at a place with good visibility for the motorists and with a broad berm, making the stopping and restarting of vehicles quite easy and safe. The experiment took place between 2 p.m. and 4 p.m. during weekends on particularly sunny and pleasant days at the beginning of summer. The confederates were dressed in a casual way for young people of their age (t-shirts, jeans, and tennis shoes of light colors). Each confederate was standing alone on the side of the road, holding in his/her hand a paperboard sign of 30 cm x 20 cm on which was written the name of a city located halfway up of the peninsula (approximately 11 kilometers). According to the condition, a smiling face (☺) was (or was not) drawn on the upper left side of the sign. A pretest had shown that the drivers could see the drawing on the sign. The confederates were instructed to always hold the sign at the same height and not to look at the drivers in the eyes, but to look at an unknown point opposite them. If a driver stopped, the confederate was then instructed to debrief the participant. He/she explained to the driver that he/she was conducted an experiment on hitchhiking. Then, the driver was warmly thanked for his help. Once 40 cars had passed by (7.13 minutes waiting on average,  $SD = 4.46$ ) the confederate changed signs. When each confederate had tested 400 drivers, the experiment stopped.

## RESULTS

All the drivers who stopped were men, rendering impossible any comparison of the sex of the drivers. The number of drivers who stopped is presented in Table 1, categorized according to the confederate's gender and the experimental condition. Since no differences between the confederates of the same gender were found between the two men and the two women, the data were aggregated.

A main effect of the confederates' gender was obtained. Generally speaking, female confederates were more likely to get a ride than male hitchhikers ( $X^2(1, N = 1600) = 14.43, p < .001$ ). A main effect of the

type of sign used was also observed ( $X^2(1, N = 1600) = 7.59, p < .01$ ). However, contrary to my assumption, the presence of the smiley face was associated with a decrease in the number of drivers who offered to give a lift. A significant interaction, tested by way of a 2 (male and female confederate)  $\times$  2 (no drawing/smiley face)  $\times$  2 (driver stop/no stop) log-linear analysis, between the confederates' gender and the type of sign used was observed ( $X^2(4, N = 1600) = 23.59, p < .001$ ). The presence of the smiley face did not have any effect at all on drivers' stopping rates when the hitchhiker was a man ( $X^2(1, N = 800) = 0.33, ns$ ). In contrast, the smiley face led to decreased stopping rates when the hitchhiker was a woman ( $X^2(1, N = 800) = 6.82, p < .01$ ).

TABLE 1: Number of Participants who Stopped According to the Type of Sign Used and the Gender of the Confederate<sup>1</sup>

	Sign Without Drawing	Sign With Smiling
	Face	
Male Confederates	29 (7.3%)	24 (6.0%)
Female Confederates	62 (15.5%)	35 (8.8%)

<sup>1</sup>There were 400 drivers per case

### DISCUSSION

Results of the present study showed that, in general, female hitchhikers were helped more than male hitchhikers. This finding is consistent with other field experiments conducted on hitchhiking (Clifford & Cleary, 1971; Morgan et al., 1975; Snyder et al., 1974). In other studies more help was offered to female hitchhikers even in high need situations. Pomazal and Clore (1973) have shown that when the hitchhiker-confederate presented a physical disability, females were helped more than males. Such results are also consistent with the literature of helping behavior in general. When the helper is a male, a woman in apparent need tends to be helped more than a man in apparent need (Bickman, 1974; Dovidio, 1982; Gore, Tobiasen & Kayson, 1997; Latané & Dabbs, 1975; Simon, 1976). This effect is also accentuated in a high need situation (Juni & Rooth, 1981).

Contrary to our hypothesis, the presence of the smiling face on the sign decreased the number of drivers stopping and offering rides to the hitchhiking confederates. However this phenomenon was observed only when the hitchhiker was a woman, whereas no difference between the two types of sign was observed when the hitchhiker was a man. These results contrast sharply with those of previous studies. Rind and Bordia

(1996) have shown that when the "smiley" face appeared on the back of customers' bill, it led patrons to give more tip money to a waitress. When a waiter drew a "smiley" face no difference was found. In the present experiment, when the drawing appeared on the sign of the two male confederates it had no effect on the drivers stopping rate, just as it had no effect on tipping in Rind and Bordia's study. Yet, this drawing apparently affected the drivers negatively in the present study when the hitchhiker was a woman. Of course, my research does not correspond to that carried out by Rind and Bordia (1996) on several points. The dependent variable was different, the subjects of Rind and Bordia were in groups of both men and women, whereas my participants were primarily men driving alone, as was true in other field studies conducted on hitchhiking (Forsyth, 1978; Pomazal & Clore, 1973). The two studies were conducted in different countries (USA/France). However, the cultural difference seems an unlikely explanation, since Gueguen and LeGohérel (2000), and Gueguen (In press), showed that, in France, bar customers reacted positively (i.e. they left larger tips to waiters and waitresses) to a funny drawing appearing on the bill or to a joke written on a card accompanying the bill. In both studies, no difference was observed according to the server's gender.

The effect observed may come from a differential reaction to the drawing when it comes from a woman. Studies have shown that people react differently to the same joke according to whether it is told by a man or a woman (Herzog, 1999; Mundorf, Bhatia, Zilman, Lester & Robertson, 1988; Van Giffen & Maher, 1995). It is possible that, in the present study the drawing led the drivers to perceive the female confederate less positively, which, in return, resulted in decreasing their likelihood of helping. It may also be that this decrease is due to a perception of incongruity between the smiling face and the hitchhiker's gender.

Perhaps humor on the part of a female-hitchhiker was perceived by male drivers as a sign of less femininity because being humorous is traditionally perceived as a male characteristic (Wilson & Mollleston, 1981). Harris and Bays (1973) have shown that women solicitors were helped more when wearing feminine than when wearing masculine attire. Tice and Baumeister (1985) have also found such results in an emergency situation. In my experiment, humor may had had the same effect.

Of course, the results of the present study provide no proof for such explanations. In order to evaluate them, further experiments need to be conducted. The "less positive perception" hypothesis created by a woman hitchhiker holding a smiling face on her sign should be evaluated. In the two experimental conditions, photographs of the confederates could be used as a stimulus to evaluate the impression created by the hitchhiker

and the probability of stopping in such conditions. The appropriateness of humor in accordance with the confederate's gender needs to be evaluated in the same way.

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