

Experiment B+: comparing the social impact of three choreographies

What happens during a performance between audience and performers? Often performers can feel a certain connection with their audience and, likewise, audience members can feel connected with what they see on stage. In Experiment B+ we were interested in whether we could capture what kind of social relationships would develop between performers and audience when we would expose the audience to different choreographies.

Each choreography in Experiment B+ was developed to reflect a different social situation. In one choreography the performers acted as unconnected individuals, in the other two choreographies the performers were connected, either emphasizing individual differences between the performers (individualism) or emphasizing similarity between the performers (collectivism). More importantly for the experiment; even though these were three different choreographies, they all had the same music and light, and they were performed by the same four performers who were wearing the same costumes!

So what did we find out? The audience felt that they could better connect with the performers when the connection among the performers was stronger. So, when the performers did not display a connection, the audience reported that they themselves also connected less with the performers. Next, we asked the audience whether they felt togetherness among the audience when watching each performance. Here we found that the audience reported to feel more togetherness among the audience when the performers emphasized similarity rather than when they emphasized individual differences (no matter whether these individuals were connected or not).

Another fascinating finding was that overall audience members were confused about the choreography in which the performers acted as unconnected individuals. So even though this performance recently won a prize, and is thus of high artistic quality, audience members had a hard time connecting with it and understanding it. However, for Experiment B+ we looked at what happened when we would either present this choreography first (in Amsterdam and Arnhem) or last (in Tilburg and Rotterdam). Amazingly enough this mattered; the audiences in Tilburg and Rotterdam experienced this performance as less sad, more meaningful, and less confusing than the audiences in Amsterdam and Arnhem. In other words, the experience of this performance when it is presented last, seems colored by what the audience experienced in the two previous performances. The audience seem much less puzzled by an unconnected group of performers when they saw the performers connect before, and the audience is much more puzzled when this context is missing.

In other words, this data suggests that we connect better with choreographies in which the movements expresses togetherness among the performers than choreographies in which the movements display disconnection between the performers. Although we seem better equipped to deal with disconnection between the performers when it is preceded by seeing togetherness. And finally, only when we watch movements that express collective similarities rather than individual differences can we experience the audience as a 'we' rather than 'I'.