

Exploring the Relationship between Humour and Psychological Well-Being

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Abstract

Laughter is the shortest distance between two people. A well-balanced sense of humour is the pole that adds balance to your steps as you walk the tightropes of life. "Laughter is the best medicine" a notion that still persists today and not just in cliches. Recent researches have established that humour is a multi-faceted construct that includes both adaptive and maladaptive humour styles. Four humour styles have been hypothesized and validated by the Humour Styles Questionnaire(HSQ) namely affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive and self-defeating. This paper is aimed at studying the relationship between humour styles and psychological well-being. It is a review of the results of an analysis of evidence and non-evidence-based research papers. The analysis suggested that affiliative & Self-enhancing humour style was positively related to agreeableness, openness, extraversion as well as psychological well-being whereas aggressive humour was negatively linked to agreeableness, conscientiousness and well-being. Self-defeating humour positively linked to neuroticism and negatively related to conscientiousness and well-being. Henceforth, when done well, humour can have a significant positive effect on your life. Isn't it time we use a little more academic rigour to figure out how it works? By developing a better understanding of humour, ways can then be suggested by which people can live better lives - from helping them cope with psychological problems and stress.

Keywords: *humour, sense of humour, humour styles, psychological well being*

Humour in Psychology

Humour is mankind's greatest gift and blessing. A well-balanced sense of humour is the pole that adds balance to your steps as you walk the tightropes of life. "Laughter is the best medicine" a notion that still persists today and not just in cliches. Recent researches have established that

humour is a multi-faceted construct and can function as a coping mechanism, helping individuals adapt to various situations and difficulties, across the age groups, and there are indicators in the literature that humor is experienced and valued differently at different ages. Humour is a fundamental phenomenon of human experience and it allows to connect individuals with others through a common and shared experience. Humour manifests itself differently across different genders, age groups and cultures.

Humour has been said to be an important aspect of personality. It is a quality that is deemed very desirable and attractive. Humour is the ability to find things funny around in any place or situation. Actually, it is the quality of being or becoming funny. According to Oxford dictionary, it has been asserted as the quality of being amusing or comic, particularly in verbal speech.

Being one of the hot topics in positive psychology, many researches relating humor have been done. In these researches, humor was found to be related to both physical and psychological well-being. Greater sense of humor was assumed to be relevant to several positive characteristics (Kuiper and Martin 1998)[12]. Humor tests were found to be positively correlated to the measurement of self-esteem. In addition, higher scores of humor scales were reported to be related to higher levels of emotional health, positive mood and zest of life (Celso et al. 2003)[3].

Humour in psychology is entwined with different aspects such as cognition, emotion (amusement, mirth, hilarity, cheerfulness and merriment), social life and well-being. It serves numerous psychological functions like: cognitive and social function of positive emotions, for social communication and influence, tension relief and coping, selection of sexual partner.

Definition of Humour

Humor is nowadays seen as having multidimensional characteristics. Martin (2007) describes humor as a characteristic of a person rather than of a statement[17]. Likewise, humor includes the abilities to produce, recognize, and appreciate humor and to use humor as a coping strategy.

According to Martin (2007), humor may be viewed as a habitual pattern, an ability, a temperament, an aesthetic response, an attitude, a world view, a coping strategy, or a defense mechanism[17]. Furthermore, Martin (2007) distinguished four components of the humor process, that is, a social context, a cognitive-perceptual process, an emotional response, and the vocal-behavioral expression of laughter [17]

According to Long and Graesser (1988), humor is “anything done or said, purposely or inadvertently, that is found to be comical or amusing”[16]. Crawford (1994) highlighted the positive cognitive or affective reactions of listeners when witnessing someone else’s verbal or nonverbal humorous behavior [4]. Similarly, Romero and Cruthirds (2006) defined humor as amusing communications that create a positive cognitive and emotional reaction in a person or a group. [23] All these definitions are problematic in that they refer to the reactions of the audience.

Booth-Butterfield and Booth-Butterfield (1991) emphasized the intentional use of both verbal and non- verbal communication behaviors that elicit positive responses such as laughter and joy. Though intention is not a crucial element of definitions of humour [1]

Meyer (2000) defined humor as a cognitive state of mirth Focusing on humor appreciation [18]. Weisfeld (1993) defined humor appreciation as “a distinct, pleasurable affect that often is accompanied by laughter” [28]. Laughter is the most obvious behavioral expression of humor (or rather: is caused by humor) and includes a distinctive behavioral pattern that also has psychophysiological correlates [24]. Ruch and Ekman defined laughter as a vocal expressive-communicative signal and provided an overview of laughter in terms of respiration, vocalization, facial action, body movement, mechanisms, and element definition [24]. Dijkers, Doosje, and de Lange presented a model of organizational humor based on inter- acting communication levels [6]. They built on Romero and Cruthirds’ definitions and defined organizational humor as “non-serious incongruity shared in work settings aimed at the intentional amusement of individuals, groups or organizations”.

As humor has internal and communicational facets, our working definition encompasses humor as a communicative process that includes incongruence and evokes a variety of emotions, either in the “producer” of humor, in the “receiver” of humor, or in both.

The Humour Styles Model

Martin's humour styles model was chosen as the model for this study primarily because it, and its corresponding instrument, are at the forefront of current humour research [17]. While previous models aimed to describe and measure all humour or just one specific portion of it, the Humour Styles Questionnaire (HSQ) measures dimensions of humour. It was developed through the factor analysis of hundreds of self-report humour items from a survey of several hundred participants, and the various types, styles and kinds of humour were reduced into a simple and elegant model.

The model contrasts social versus self-oriented humour as well as whether the humour is positive or negative, which gives a 2x2 model of four humour styles. Note that negative humour is not to be confused with poor or weak humour such as an unsuccessful punch line; rather, it is the kind of humour that has a negative affect on its producer, intended audience or unintended audience. Looking first at the self-oriented styles, self-enhancing humour encompasses all kinds of coping humour and manifests itself in individuals who remain positive and are able to see the light side of unpleasant or stressful situations [17]. Self-enhancing humour is often manifested in being able to cheer oneself up and experiencing amusement without the need for other people to be around. Noticing amusing aspects of everyday life is also a common example of this style.

Example: Winnie the Pooh is a familiar character with this attitude, as in this example: "Weeds are flowers too, once you get to know them"

Self-defeating humour is simply humour in which someone amuses other people by putting him or herself down. Commonly an attempt at pleasing other people or getting some kind of approval from a group, this style also includes incidents in which someone laughs along with humour made at their expense [17].

Example: the class-clown might be the most familiar example

Looking next at the social styles of humour, affiliative humour is the style that encompasses positive humorous interaction found in groups. It reduces tension and helps to build relationships, and is most commonly manifested in banter, humorous observations and jokes [17]. People who often use this style can have an ability to bring groups together and create a positive atmosphere.

Example: Stand-up comedians such as Jerry Seinfeld are a good example of this positive humour style:

Finally, aggressive humour is the style encompassing negative attempts at group humour, most commonly manifested in behaviour such as teasing, sarcasm, disparagement and ridicule [17]. It can be manipulative or simply ignorant of others' feelings. It includes the humour described in the negative experience of someone encountering or overhearing humour at the expense of a group that they are a part of, such as their gender identity, ethnic identity, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, or vocation.

Example: Bullies are the classic example of a group that uses this humour style.

Psychological well being

The literature on psychological well-being has progressed rapidly since the emergence of the field over five decades ago. As recent surveys show psychologists and other social scientists have taken huge steps in their understanding of the factors influencing psychological/ subjective well-being.

Psychological well-being refers to how people evaluate their lives. According to Diener (1997), these evaluations may be in the form of cognitions or in the form of affect [5]. The cognitive part is an information based appraisal of one's life that is when a person gives conscious evaluative judgments about one's satisfaction with life as a whole. The affective part is a hedonic evaluation guided by emotions and feelings such as frequency with which people experience pleasant/unpleasant moods in reaction to their lives. The assumption behind this is that most people evaluate their life as either good or bad, so they are normally able to offer judgments. Further, people invariably experience moods and emotions, which have a positive effect or a

negative effect. Thus, people have a level of subjective well-being even if they do not often consciously think about it, and the psychological system offers virtually a constant evaluation of what is happening to the person.

Current social indicators can capture phenomena such as crime, divorce, environmental problems, infant mortality, gender equality, etc. Thus, they can capture aspects of quality of life that add to the description drawn by economic indicators. However, these social indicators fail to capture the subjective well-being of people because they do not reflect the actual experiences such as the quality of relationships, the regulation of their emotions and whether feelings of isolation and depression pervade in their daily life. On the other hand, economic indicators fail to include side effects and the tradeoffs of market production and consumption. For example, the environmental costs of industries certainly are not observed from the national accounts. Another disadvantage of economic and social measures in terms of their links to psychological well-being is that they are based on models of rational choice, whereby people follow a set of logical rules when making development plans. However, works by Kahneman (1994) in psychology and economics reveal that people do not always make rational choices, and that these choices do not necessarily enhance psychological well-being [11]

Psychological well-being leads to desirable outcomes, even economic ones, and does not necessarily follow from them. In a very intensive research done by Diener and his colleagues, people who score high in psychological well-being later earn high income and perform better at work than people who score low in well-being. It is also found to be related to physical health [5] In addition, it is often noticed that what a society measures will in turn influence the things that it seeks. If a society takes great effort to measure productivity, people in the society are likely to focus more on it and sometimes even to the detriment of other values. If a society regularly assesses well-being, people will provide their attention on it and learn more about its causes. Psychological well-being is therefore valuable not only because it assesses well-being more directly but it has beneficial consequences.

Dimensions of Psychological Well Being

Well-being is a dynamic concept that includes subjective, social, and psychological dimensions as well as health-related behaviors. The Ryff Scales of Psychological Well-Being is a theoretically grounded instrument that specifically focuses on measuring multiple facets of psychological well-being [25]. These facets include the following:

- self-acceptance
- the establishment of quality ties to other
- a sense of autonomy in thought and action
- the ability to manage complex environments to suit personal needs and values
- the pursuit of meaningful goals and a sense of purpose in life
- continued growth and development as a person

This straightforward inventory is easy to access and administer. Well-being is a multifaceted concept. It is often thought of as one of the hallmarks of the liberal arts experience, resulting from educational encounters that both guide students in the search for meaning and direction in life and help them realize their true potential. The Ryff is a straightforward and relatively short survey that assesses the psychological component of well-being. This review discusses the administration and cost of the Ryff; the theoretical background, development, and psychometric properties of the instrument; and possible uses of this instrument in higher education assessment settings.

Overall, psychological well-being tends to improve with age. Four of the six dimensions of psychological well-being increase with age in the MIDUS study, while personal growth and purpose in life show age decrements. Social well-being, on the other hand, reveals a more balanced profile of age increments (i.e., in social integration and social acceptance) and age decrements (i.e., in social contribution and social coherence), while social actualization is lowest among the young and oldest adults (i.e., it peaks in middle-age) [25].

Long before the field of “positive psychology” was labeled, Carol Ryff was doing pioneering work on the study of psychological well-being. Similar to some of the discussions and debates my family was having, she argued that most research on well-being up to that time largely translated into happiness. However, when she thought of well-being she thought about it more in

terms of optimal psychological functioning rather than happiness. She engaged in a systematic review of theories and perspectives in psychology, where she identified six broad facets associated with optimal psychological functioning as follows: 1) self-acceptance; 2) positive relations; 3) autonomy; 4) environmental mastery; 5) purpose in life and 6) a sense of personal growth [25]

Relationship between Humour and Psychological Well Being

The relationship between humour and psychological well being has been examined in many researches, especially in the researches conducted in the recent years. A study conducted on residents of an old-age home by Houston et al (1998) attempted to explain the impact of humour on their psychological well-being by dividing the residents into two groups: experimental group and their control group [9]. Later, it was found that the residents in experimental group who participated in humorous activities had significantly lower levels of anxiety and depression when compared to the control group who received no intervention. Therefore, concluding, greater the humour, lesser the anxiety and depression. Research on coping humour and its relationship with depression, social skills, loneliness and social anxiety by Nezelek and Peter (2007) found that coping humour was positively related to how pleasurable and confident the participants felt in the interactions and this relationship was moderated by depression [20].

Sense of humour plays an important role in psychological adjustment of college students. It has been found in a research performed by Overholser (1992) who examined humour and its relationship with loneliness, depression and self esteem. The findings of this study indicated that humour was associated with lower loneliness, lower depression and higher self esteem [21].

In a recent research, it was found that the humour orientation negatively predicted loneliness and perceived stress (Miczo in 2009) [19]. Walter et al (2007) conducted a study to find the impact of humour therapy on patients with late-life depression and found that although there was no significant effect of humour therapy on compared with standard therapy on depression, but it can be used as an additional therapeutic tool to treat depression [27]. Wanzer and Booth-Butterfield

(2009) conducted a study on 125 undergraduates and found that higher humour orientation was associated with lower levels of loneliness [28].

In a research conducted by Schiau (2016) explored the social & emotional loneliness, social interactions and humour on a sample of Romanian students and found the production and social use of humor to be correlated to a reduced social loneliness [26]. Another research performed by Kuiper et al (1993) supported the proposal that a sense of humor may facilitate coping and well being through its findings [14].

Kuiper & Mc Hale (2001) examined how certain humor styles mediate the relations between self-evaluative standards (which form the primary evaluative component of the self-schema) and psychological well-being [13]. As predicted, greater endorsement of positive self-evaluative standards led to the use of more affiliative humor, which, in turn, led to higher levels of social self-esteem and lower levels of depression. Also, as predicted, greater endorsement of negative self-evaluative standards led to the use of more self-defeating humor, which resulted in lower levels of social self-esteem and higher levels of depression. Further, affiliative humor also mediated the relation between negative self-evaluative standards and well-being. In this study, the greater endorsement of negative self-evaluative standards led to the use of less affiliative humor, which led to a decrease in social self-esteem. These results suggest that specific features associated with these 2 humor styles may contribute in a differential manner to an individual's level of well-being. In particular, the increased use of affiliative humor may facilitate the development and maintenance of social support networks that foster and enhance well-being. Alternatively, the greater use of self-defeating humor may result in the development of maladaptive social support networks that impede psychological well-being.

Dyck & Holtzman's (2014) study sought to replicate and extend previous findings by (1) investigating whether the differential effects of humor styles on well-being may be explained by their associations with social support, and (2) whether the weak and inconsistent relationship between aggressive humor and well-being may be due to a moderating role of gender [7]. A total of 826 undergraduate students completed a series of online standardized questionnaires, including the Humor Styles Questionnaire, Beck Depression Inventory (BDI-II), Satisfaction

with Life Scale, and Interpersonal Support Evaluation List (ISEL-12). Mediation analyses revealed that the positive relationship between affiliative and self-enhancing humor and well-being was explained by a greater perceived availability of support. Meanwhile, the negative association between self-defeating humor and well-being was mediated by lower levels of perceived support. Moderation analyses provided preliminary support for the idea that an aggressive humor style may be related to higher levels of social support among men, and lower social support among women. Further research on the interpersonal context of humor and the role of gender in humor styles, social relationships, and well-being is warranted.

Ruch, and Heintz (2001) conducted two studies analysed how much unique variance the HSQ contributed to predicting psychological well-being over and above personality [24]. While the affiliative, self-enhancing and self-defeating humour style were potent predictors of well-being in Study 1, the results also indicated that these humour styles had small effects when personality was controlled for. Study 2 tested a possible explanation for these findings, namely that the context (i.e., non-humorous components) of the HSQ items dominates their humour-specific content. Two questionnaires were utilised to separate context and humour components in the HSQ. Results showed that (a) the HSQ contributed little in predicting personality and psychological well-being once context was controlled for, and that (b) the humour component of each HSQ scale correlated highly with other humour instruments and neither of them were detrimental or maladaptive in terms of psychological well-being. Thus, these two studies showed a low incremental validity of humour styles in predicting psychological well-being beyond personality and hint to a limited role that humour plays in the these relationships. Overall, the humour components of the HSQ rather resemble those of other self-report measures and mainly comprise humour appreciation and humour production in everyday life.

In a study conducted by Cann and Collette(2014), a good sense of humor has been implicated as a quality that could contribute to psychological well-being [2]. The mechanisms through which sense of humor might operate include helping to reappraise threats, serving as a character strength, or facilitating happiness. The results indicated that stable affect was related to resilience and psychological well-being, and that a sense of humor that involves self-enhancing humor, humor based on maintaining a humorous perspective about one's experiences, was positively

related to stable positive affect, negatively related to stable negative affect, and was mediated through stable affect in influencing resilience, well-being and distress. Thus, while a good sense of humor can lead to greater resilience and better psychological health, the current results, focusing on stable affect, find only self-enhancing humor provides reliable benefits.

Kuiper et al (2009) explored how humor may be involved in the identity and intimacy stages of Erikson's psychosocial model and also bear on psychological well-being [8] [13]. Participants completed measures of identity and intimacy development, several humor styles, and psychological well-being. Findings revealed that greater identity development was associated with more self-enhancing and affiliative humor use and less self-defeating humor use. Greater intimacy, in turn, was associated with higher affiliative humor and lower self-defeating humor use. Additional findings indicated that the prediction of psychological well-being was significantly enhanced when identity, intimacy, and humor styles were all taken into account. These findings were then considered in terms of specifying the underlying processes that may account for the observed links between identity, intimacy, humor styles, and well-being.

Jovanoic (2011) conducted research to examine the role of humor styles in the relationships between personality (extraversion and neuroticism) and two components of subjective well-being: life satisfaction and affective well-being [10]. The sample consisted of 225 young adults, with mean age 23.61 years. Results indicated that the relationship between both extraversion and neuroticism and satisfaction with life could be partially explained by the mediating role of self-enhancing humor. Additionally, affiliative humor proved to be a partial mediator of the relationship between neuroticism and affective well-being. The findings of this research suggested that adaptive humor styles might be one of the mechanisms linking personality and subjective well-being.

Discussion

This study was aimed at investigating the relationship between humour styles and psychological well-being. The previous researches conducted on this topic suggested a strong correlation between humour styles and psychological well-being, with affiliative and self-enhancing humour

styles relating to high scores in psychological well-being while self-deprecating and aggressive humour styles relating to low scores in psychological well-being.

Martin et al. (2007) found affiliative humor style to be related to indicators of psychological health [17]. Another study by Dyck and Holtzman (2013) found that the relationship between an affiliative humor style and depressive symptoms was fully mediated through perceived social support, but the relationship for a self-enhancing style with depressive symptoms remained even when social support was controlled [7]. Thus, it seems a worthwhile direction for future research to consider how a good sense of humor, based on high affiliative humor uses, might influence psychological health by providing the resources often available through greater social support. Can and Collette (2014) offer initial support for the importance of a good sense of humor, reflected in higher uses of self-enhancing humor, in supporting stable positive affect, building resilience, and limiting psychological distress [2]. Obviously, it will now be important to examine these relationships in a more diverse sample and over a longer period of time. In addition, it will be important to consider humor and sense of humor as complex constructs. Attempts to assess sense of humor as a global construct are likely to confound adaptive and maladaptive humor styles and lead to inconsistent findings. Humor uses, when adaptive, can be beneficial, but not all uses of humor will be adaptive. Furthermore, the different forms of adaptive humor may operate differently in affecting psychological health.

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