

Psychological correlates of humor styles

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to determine the relationship between humor styles and contingencies of self-worth, shyness, self-esteem, and satisfaction with life. Participants completed the Humor Styles Questionnaire, the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale, the Shyness Scale, the Self-Esteem Scale and the Satisfaction with Life Scale. Correlational analyses were used to examine relationships among these scales. Results showed that self-esteem predicted use of affiliative and self-enhancing humor styles and less use of a self-defeating style, whereas shyness consistently predicted use of aggressive and self-defeating humor styles. Satisfaction with life was also associated with use of affiliative and self-enhancing humor styles.

Keywords: Humor styles, self-esteem, shyness, satisfaction with life, self-worth

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Professor Sweeny studies threat management: how people give news of, prepare for, and respond to negative life events. Throughout their lives, people repeatedly encounter the possibility or reality of undesirable outcomes in domains ranging from their health, career, and relationships to the most mundane. The processes by which people await uncertain news, pass along bad news to others, and respond to their outcomes are the subjects of my broad but interconnected research program. These lines of research incorporate the study of risk judgments, coping, decision making, emotions, social cognition, health, and communication. Within the broad topic of threat management, my theoretical and empirical work thus far has focused on two distinct but related research areas: uncertainty navigation and health communication.



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Andie Preuss is a graduating senior in psychology. He has worked for the better part of two years in Dr. Kate Sweeny's Life Events Lab as a research assistant, an experience that has deepened his interest in research. Later this year he will begin a doctoral program in I/O Psychology at University of Missouri, St. Louis. Andie would like to thank Professor Sweeny for her mentorship and guidance.

INTRODUCTION

All individuals employ a type of humor style when interacting with others. A humor style is the type of humor an individual typically practices when interacting with others. The type of humor style being employed can make a significant difference in individuals' self-esteem, satisfaction with life, and shyness (Erozkan, 2009; Cavanaugh, 2003). Individuals' humor styles can either strengthen or weaken how they feel about and perceive themselves, including their self-esteem and satisfaction with life. The goal of this study is to enhance the understanding of how these humor styles correlate with other individual differences, such as self-esteem, shyness, satisfaction with life, and contingencies of self-worth. Previous studies find that there are four key types of humor styles; affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating (Martin et al., 2003). The present study examines which humor styles are associated with individuals' self-esteem, satisfaction with life, shyness and contingencies of self-worth as there is a limited body of research in this domain.

Several lines of research provide insight into how humor styles might be related to people's views of themselves. There are four identified humor styles that are distinguished in the Humor Styles Questionnaire (developed by Martin et al., 2003). This scale is a well-established inventory designed to be brief, cost effective, and relatively easy to understand. The first two styles are theorized to promote positive emotions and interactions between others. The first humor style is affiliative humor, which is used to enhance relationships and social cohesion by sharing jokes and not taking oneself too seriously. The second humor style is self-enhancing humor, which is used to maintain self-esteem and cope with life events by seeing the funny side of life.

The other two styles are theorized to promote negative or undesired emotions and interactions between others. The first of these humor styles is aggressive humor, which is used to belittle others through teasing and sarcasm. The second of these humor styles is self-defeating humor, which is used to mask feeling by belittling oneself in front of others. Based on these descriptions, it is clear that humor styles play an integral role in shaping people's perceptions of themselves (Martin et al., 2003).

Affiliative and self-enhancing humor styles promote self-perceptions that are positive and pro-social. For example, people who use these humor styles would likely see themselves as agreeable, open, and having an extraverted personality (Martin et al., 2003; Greengross, 2011). Having a positive perception of oneself can create a cycle of positive effects. By being open, agreeable, and outgoing, others perceive that person as friendly and interesting and this further increases their positive self-perceptions.

In contrast, aggressive and self-defeating humor styles promote self-perceptions that may be negative and anti-social. For example, people who use these humor styles may be less agreeable or conscientious of others, and self-defeating humor also correlates with neuroticism (Greengross, 2011). Having a negative self-perception can create a cycle of negative effects. Others may perceive individuals who practice an aggressive or self-defeating humor style as not being agreeable, confident or emotionally stable (Greengross, 2011). This may lead individuals who practice an aggressive or self-defeating humor style to become alienated or isolated from others. The following hypotheses guided the present study:

Hypothesis 1: Individuals who practice an affiliative or self-enhancing humor style will be less shy than individuals who practice an aggressive or self-defeating humor style (Erozkan, 2009).

Hypothesis 2: Individuals who practice an affiliative or self-enhancing humor style will have higher self-esteem than individuals who practice an aggressive or self-defeating humor style (Erozkan, 2009). Individuals who practice an affiliative or self-enhancing humor style will have more social support to bolster their self-esteem, while individuals who practice an aggressive or self-defeating humor style may lack social support (Fitts & Zlokovich, 2009).

Hypothesis 3: Individuals who practice an affiliative or self-enhancing humor style will have higher satisfaction with life than individuals who practice an aggressive or self-defeating humor style (Cavanaugh, 2003). In addition, individuals who practice an affiliative or self-enhancing humor style will have a positive psychological well-being,

which can entail more subjective contentment in life and being able to successfully accomplish social challenges and tasks (Khumalo, 2012). This can further promote a satisfied view of one's life (Klein, 2010).

This study will also examine relationships between an individuals' humor style and their contingencies of self-worth. Contingencies of self-worth are aspects of life that people feels either promotes or defines their self-worth and that they thus invest more time in. There are seven contingencies of self-worth distinguished using the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale (Crocker, 2002). They include academic competence, appearance, God's love, family support, approval from others, virtue, and competition. For example, individuals whose self-worth is contingent or based on academic competence would be more upset by a low grade than an individual who did not rate high for self-worth contingent on academic competence, and their self-worth may be negatively affected. Due to the exploratory nature of this aspect of the study, we did not have formal hypotheses regarding the relationship between humor styles and the specific contingencies of self-worth.

METHODS

Participants

Participants ($N = 84$) were recruited using Amazon.com's *mTurk* survey creator through which members of the service were able to complete the survey. Participants were located both in and outside of the U.S. All participants agreed to participate in this study for a compensation of \$0.10 each. The sample consisted of 48 males and 30 females, with 6 participants choosing to remain unidentified. The sample consisted of 66 non-Hispanics and 15 Hispanics, with 3 participants choosing to remain unidentified. The sample consisted of 6 American Indians or Alaska Natives, 54 Asians, 2 African Americans, 18 Caucasians, and 4 participants who responded as other. The age distribution of the sample was 42% between 18-28, 43% between 29-40, 10% between 41-55 and 5% over the age of 56. All procedures were reviewed, approved, and overseen by the IRB at the University of California, Riverside.

Measures

Humor styles were measured using the Humor Styles Questionnaire (Martin et al., 2003). The scale is a 32-item measure and measures participants tendency to use each of four styles: *affiliative* humor style (8 items; e.g., "I seem to be a naturally humorous person; I enjoy making people laugh"; $M = 4.59$; $SD = .81$), *self-enhancing* humor style (8 items; e.g., "I'm often amused by the absurdities of life; I can usually find things to laugh about even when I am by myself"; $M = 4.41$; $SD = .834$), *aggressive* humor style (8 items; e.g., "If I don't like someone, I use humor or teasing to put them down; I am usually not concerned with how others are taking a joke"; $M = 3.52$; $SD = .89$), and *self-defeating* humor (8 items; "I let people laugh at me; I often get carried away with putting myself down if others are laughing"; $M = 3.84$; $SD = 1.10$). Responses on this scale ranged from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 7 (*totally agree*) (Martin et al., 2003).

Contingencies of self-worth were measured using the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale (Crocker, 2002). The scale is a 35-item measure and measures the degree of self-worth participants associated with seven values: *family support* (5 items; e.g., "Knowing my family members love me make me feel good about myself; It is important to my self-respect that I have a family that cares about me"; $M = 5.17$; $SD = 1.19$), *competition* (5 items; e.g., "I feel worthwhile when I perform better than others; Knowing I am better than others at a task raises my self-esteem"; $M = 5.28$; $SD = 1.10$), *appearance* (5 items; e.g., "When I think I look attractive, I feel good about myself; My sense of self-worth suffers whenever I think I don't look good"; $M = 4.60$; $SD = 0.98$), *God's love* (5 items; "My self-worth is based on God's love; I feel worthwhile when I have God's love" ($M = 5.11$; $SD = 1.64$), *academic competence* (5 items; "I feel better about myself when I know I'm doing well academically; My self-esteem is influenced by my academic performance"; $M = 4.94$; $SD = .78$), *virtue* (5 items; "Doing something I know is wrong makes me lose my self-respect; I couldn't respect myself if I didn't live up to a moral code"; $M = 5.21$; $SD = 1.10$), and *approval from others* (5 items; "My self-esteem depends on the opinions others hold of me; I care if other people have a negative opinion of me"; $M = 3.91$; $SD = 1.17$). Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*; Crocker, 2002).

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Shyness was measured using the 20-Item Shyness Scale (Cheek & Melichor, 1985). The scale is a 20-item measure. Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) and included items such as “I feel tense when I’m with people I don’t know well” and “I feel inhibited in social situations” ($M = 2.90$; $SD = .072$; Cheek & Melichor, 1985).

Self-esteem was measured using Rosenberg’s Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1989). The scale is a 10-item measure. Responses ranged from 0 (*strongly Disagree*) to 3 (*strongly agree*) and included such items as “I feel that I have a number of good qualities” and “I am able to do things as well as most other people” ($M = 1.92$; $SD = 0.56$; Rosenberg, 1989). Self-esteem is an individual’s attitude toward them self, in either a positive or negative manner, whereas self-worth involves aspects an individual considers important to who they are (Crocker, 2002).

Satisfaction with life was measured using the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985). The scale is a 5-item measure. Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) and included such items as “I am satisfied with my life” and “If I could live my life over I would change almost nothing” ($M = 4.62$; $SD = 1.35$; Diener et al., 1985).

RESULTS

See Table 1 for all correlations. Affiliative humor style involves the use of social and friendly humor. Regarding the contingencies of self-worth, use of an affiliative humor style was positively correlated with family support and appearance. In contrast, use of an affiliative humor style was not negatively correlated with any contingencies of self-worth. Affiliative humor style was not significantly correlated with competition, God’s love, academic competence, virtue or approval from others. With regard to the other variables of interest, use of an affiliative humor style was positively correlated with self-esteem and satisfaction with life. Affiliative humor style was not significantly correlated with shyness.

Self-enhancing humor style involves the ability to see the funny side of life. Regarding the contingencies of self-worth, use of a self-enhancing humor style was positively correlated with virtue. In contrast, use of a self-enhancing humor style was negatively correlated with appearance and approval from others. Self-enhancing humor style was not significantly correlated with family support, competition, God’s love or academic competence. With regard to the other variables of interest, use of a self-enhancing humor style was positively correlated with self-esteem and satisfaction with life and negatively correlated with shyness.

Table 1: Correlations among humor styles, contingencies of self-worth, shyness, self-esteem, and satisfaction with life

	Affiliative Style	Self-Enhancing Style	Aggressive Style	Self-Defeating Style
Contingencies of self-worth				
Family support	.33*	.01	-.29*	-.03
Competition	.15	.07	-.13	.04
Appearance	.21*	-.22*	-.20*	-.08
God’s love	.11	.05	-.20*	.34*
Academic competence	.16	.08	-.21*	-.08
Virtue	.16	.20*	-.26*	-.15
Approval from others	-.05	-.32*	.02	.26*
Shyness	-.18	-.22*	.25*	.32*
Self-esteem	.34*	.21*	-.17	-.38*
Satisfaction with life	.21*	.37*	-.02	.10

Note: * = correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).

Aggressive humor style involves belittling or making fun of others. Regarding the contingencies of self-worth, use of an aggressive humor style was negatively correlated with family support, appearance, God's love, academic competence, and virtue. In contrast, none of the contingencies of self-worth were positively correlated with an aggressive humor style. Aggressive humor style was not significantly correlated with competition or approval from others. With regard to the other variables of interest, use of an aggressive humor style was positively correlated with shyness. Aggressive humor style was not significantly correlated with self-esteem or satisfaction with life.

Self-defeating humor style involves the belittling and making fun of oneself. Regarding the contingencies of self-worth, use of a self-defeating humor style was positively correlated with God's love and approval from others. In contrast, none of the contingencies of self-worth were negatively correlated with a self-defeating humor style. Self-defeating humor style was not significantly correlated with family support, competition, appearance, academic competence or virtue. With regard to the other variables of interest, use of a self-defeating humor style was positively correlated with shyness and negatively related to self-esteem. Self-defeating humor style was not significantly correlated with satisfaction with life.

DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to examine the relationship between humor styles and contingencies of self-worth, shyness, self-esteem, and satisfaction with life. Overall, our findings were consistent with previous findings regarding humor styles. Specifically, several interesting findings emerged from our study. First, we found that shyness consistently predicted use of aggressive and self-defeating humor styles. Perhaps shy individuals are unable to relax in social situations, causing them to use a self-defeating or aggressive humor style as a defense mechanism in order to deny or hide their feelings (Hampes, 2006). These individuals who practice an aggressive or self-defeating humor style as a defense mechanism create distance between themselves and others by either being diminutive of themselves or others. This does not allow them to

develop friendships and interpersonal relationships, likely exacerbating their shyness. Individuals who practice an affiliative or self-enhancing humor style are less shy and are able to enhance relationships with others by being open to personal disclosure and by seeing events, even social, as a positive challenge (Fitts & Zlokovich, 2009).

Second, we found that self-esteem predicted use of affiliative and self-enhancing humor styles and less use of a self-defeating style. Individuals who practice an affiliative or self-enhancing humor style are able to create a strong social support network through their use of affiliative humor and are able to see the funny side of life through their use of self-enhancing humor (Greengross et al., 2011). This social network and self-enhancing view creates buffers for individuals who face setbacks and helps them to maintain their higher self-esteem (Stieger et al., 2011). For example, if an individual has a bad day and practices either an affiliative or self-enhancing humor style, they can either call a close friend for support or they can reflect on the more positive aspects of their life. Individuals who practice an aggressive or self-defeating humor style find it difficult to create a strong social network and may have trouble being emotionally stable (Saroglou & Scariot, 2002). This lack of a social support network and a lack of emotional stability may lead to a decreased self-esteem.

Third, we found the use of affiliative or self-enhancing humor styles predicted satisfaction with life, and use of aggressive or self-defeating styles did not. Individuals who practice an affiliative or self-enhancing humor style are able to cope with stress and adjust to new situations better, which helps maintain their satisfaction with life (Stieger et al., 2011; Fitts & Zlokovich, 2009). Individuals who practice an aggressive or self-defeating humor style tend to have smaller social support networks and an increase in anxiety which may lead to less satisfaction with life (Stieger et al., 2011; Samson, 2012).

Fourth, we found that individuals who practice an affiliative humor style are also more likely to base their self-worth on appearance. This may be due to individuals having a stronger social network and thus feeling beautiful on the inside and out (Stieger et al., 2011). It may also

be that individuals who feel they are attractive practice an affiliative humor style to initiate more relationships to foster this feeling of attractiveness (Fitts & Zlokovich, 2009). For example, if an individual whose self-worth is contingent upon their appearance has a bad day they may ask a close friend to re-assure them of their attractiveness.

Fifth, we found individuals who practice a self-enhancing humor style are less likely to base their self worth on appearance and approval from others. This may be due to individuals being emotionally stable and being able to see the funny things in life, thus not being overly concerned with things that are beyond their control (Greengross et al., 2011). If individuals who practice a self-enhancing humor style were to be in a challenging social situation, they would likely see the situation as a positive challenge and adjust accordingly (Klein, 2010).

Sixth, we found that individuals who practice an aggressive humor style are less likely to base their self-worth on academic competence and virtue. Individuals' lack of academic competence may lead them to become frustrated. Once frustrated, an individual who did not feel his or her self-worth was contingent on virtue may vent this frustration on others in a disparaging manner (Stieger et al., 2011). Also, individuals who use an aggressive humor style may do so to enhance their social status and may be more concerned with their social status than their academic competence or virtue (Greengross et al., 2011).

Finally, we found that individuals who practice a self-defeating humor style are more likely to base their self-worth on approval from others. Individuals who practice a self-defeating humor style have low self-esteem and can become anxious in social situations (Samson et al., 2012). This, along with being shy, means these individuals likely have a small social group (Hampes, 2006). These factors may lead individuals to use self-defeating humor to gain or maintain acceptance by others (Fitts & Zlokovich, 2009).

This study had several limitations that leave open the opportunity for further research. This study was a cross-sectional design, and as such we were not able to follow

the participants over time. Future research should examine whether having individuals incorporate a humor style they do not tend to use could change their contingencies of self-worth, self-esteem, satisfaction with life, or shyness over time. It would also be interesting to have participants bring in a significant other, or close friend, so that both can rate the participant on their use of the humor styles. Although future research can expand these findings, our study provides insights into key intra- and interpersonal correlates of humor styles.

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