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An Examination of Personal Humor Style and Humor Appreciation in Others

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between individuals' humor styles and their appreciation of various humor styles as presented by others. Eighty-five undergraduate John Carroll University students completed the Humor Styles Questionnaire and rated the funniness of six stand-up comedy routines, representing either aggressive, self-defeating, or affiliative humor styles with one male and one female comedian for each humor style. A mixed model Analysis of Variance revealed no relationship between humor style and humor appreciation. However, an examination of the effect of gender showed that men were more likely than women to endorse and appreciate aggressive and self-defeating humor styles.

*Keywords:* Humor Styles, Humor Appreciation, Aggressive Humor, Self-defeating Humor, Affiliative Humor

### An Examination of Personal Humor Style and Humor Appreciation in Others

Much of the research conducted in the area of psychology has focused on the diagnosis and treatment of mental disorders. Recently, researchers have shifted their attention towards understanding what factors contribute to maintaining psychological well-being and living a happier life. One of these determining factors found to be related to overall well-being is humor. Humor is abstract and, as such, is difficult to concretely define. This study seeks to enhance current knowledge regarding humor, its various styles, and its appreciation.

Since World War II, psychologists have predominantly conducted research dedicated to healing or “repairing damage” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). A recent development in the field of psychology is the area of study referred to as *positive psychology* (Secker, 1998). Although the term positive psychology is relatively new, the premise and goals of this area share many similarities with humanistic psychology (Rich, 2001). Instead of approaching psychological research from a medical perspective, positive psychologists seek to determine what factors contribute to mental and physical health, optimism, happiness, and other forms of well-being (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). One of the leading researchers and founders of positive psychology is former APA President, Martin Seligman. In a special edition of *American Psychologist* about positive psychology, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) describe Positive Psychology as “a science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions” (p. 5). In addition to discovering the determinants of human happiness and optimal functioning, another primary goal of positive psychologists is to learn how to teach individuals ways to develop skills that will foster long-lasting happiness (Norrish & Vella-Brodrick, 2009).

This is not to say that the disease-model of psychological research is unimportant. Since

World War II, this method of inquiry has brought about considerable improvement in the diagnosis and treatment of at least 14 disorders that were previously beyond our comprehension (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The purpose of positive psychology is not to eliminate the disease-model of psychological research, but rather to gain a better understanding of what it means to be mentally healthy. Positive psychologists believe that living a happy and fulfilled life requires more than simply the lack of a mental illness. By gaining a better understanding of the factors contributing to happiness and well-being, positive psychologists can facilitate higher levels of overall quality of life instead of just treating mental illness. Also, by teaching individuals the skills necessary to lead happy and fulfilling lives, positive psychologists help reduce the likelihood of future mental health issues (Norrish & Vella-Brodrick, 2009).

One approach positive psychologists utilize in finding the determinants of well-being and success is a strengths approach (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). This approach is based on the notion that every individual possesses a certain unique strength or set of strengths that he or she can use to enhance his or her well-being (Norrish & Vella-Brodrick, 2009). Character strengths in this respect can be defined as “positive traits reflected in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors” (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004, p. 603). Peterson and Seligman created the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) as a way to classify character strengths into distinct groups. There are six core groups (virtues) to which character strengths can be assigned: strengths of *wisdom and knowledge* (strengths that aid the acquisition and use of information), *courage* (strengths to accomplish goals in the face of opposition), *humanity* (strengths of helping and befriending others), *justice* (strengths that help build communities), *temperance* (strengths that guard against excess), and *transcendence* (strengths that forge connections to the larger universe). Within each of these core groups there are several specific character strengths that

contribute to overall happiness and productivity. In order to be considered a character strength, an attribute must satisfy several specific criteria. Character strengths must be widely recognized across cultures, contribute to fulfillment, be morally valued in their own right, produce no harm to others, have obvious “negative” antonyms, be trait-like, be measurable, be distinct from other character strengths, be strikingly embodied in some individuals, be precociously shown by some children, be missing entirely in some, and be the deliberate target of societal practices in its cultivation (Park et al., 2004). In all, Peterson and Seligman identified 24 specific character strengths under the six core virtues. This classification of character strengths is not immune to change as specific strengths may eventually be “added, deleted, or combined, and their organization under core virtues might be changed as theory and research proceed” (Güeswell & Ruch, 2012, p. 220).

For the purposes of my study, the character strength I chose to examine is Humor, which falls under the virtue of transcendence. Peterson and Seligman caution that these classifications are not perfectly distinct, as some strengths can fit with several different core virtues. Humor, for example, could also fit under the core virtue of humanity due to its role in the creation and maintenance of social bonds. However, Peterson and Seligman justify their classification of humor as a strength of transcendence by reasoning that humor connects people to the larger universe by bringing to their attention the irony of the human condition for the purposes of education, amusement, and comfort.

Peterson and Seligman (2004) point out that humor is easier to recognize than to define, but they provide three contemporary definitions of humor in the context of a character strength:

- (a) the playful recognition, enjoyment, and/or creation of incongruity;
- (b) a composed and cheerful view on adversity that allows one to see its light side and thereby sustain a

good mood; and (c) the ability to make others smile or laugh. (p. 584)

For the purpose of this study, I will combine two of these definitions and define humor as: the playful recognition, enjoyment, and/or creation of incongruity that allows one to sustain a good mood. A humorous individual is one who is skilled at “laughing... bringing smiles to the faces of others... and making (not necessarily telling) jokes” (Edwards & Martin, 2014).

Humor is a particularly important character strength to examine for several reasons. Primarily, humor is one of the most universally recognized virtues and as Peterson and Seligman point out, “humorless virtue thinks much of itself and is thereby deficient in virtue” (p. 530). Furthermore, Güsewell and Ruch (2012) have recently found evidence that emotional strengths such as zest, hope, bravery, humor, love, and social intelligence possess the strongest links to emotional well-being. Of the emotional strengths, humor is one of the most commonly endorsed strengths in individuals (Proctor, Maltby, & Linley, 2011). Humor has also been found to be a significant predictor of other positive psychology variables such as happiness, routes to happiness, resilience, and morality (Edwards & Martin, 2014).

Not only is humor a difficult concept to define, but also, there are a variety of different types of humor which one may employ. These specific humor styles may vary significantly from person to person and different humor styles may lead to varying levels of psychological well-being (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003). Some individuals enjoy a relatively positive or benign sense of humor while others may utilize a negative style of humor such as aggressive teasing or sarcasm (Yip & Martin, 2006). In order to understand the effects of these different humor styles, they must be identifiable and measurable.

Martin et al. (2003) categorize humor styles into four separate groups: self-enhancing humor, aggressive humor, affiliative humor, and self-defeating humor. The first two humor

styles serve to enhance one's own mood through amusement that is either positive or benign (self-enhancing) or harmful at the expense of another individual (aggressive). The last two types of humor both serve to enhance one's relationships with others either in a way that is benign and self-accepting (affiliative) or in a way that demeans oneself for the amusement of others (self-defeating). The scale used to assess these humor styles is called the Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ) and has been shown to significantly predict individual humor styles as well as the positive or negative psychological outcomes associated with positive and negative humor styles (Edwards & Martin, 2014; Martin et al., 2003).

Moreover, Martin et al. (2003) found that men reported a greater tendency than women to report using both aggressive and self-defeating humor styles. This finding suggests that men are more likely to prefer using negative humor styles than their female counterparts. Men also scored higher than women on the affiliative and self-enhancing scales, but the authors suggest these differences were much smaller and likely only gained significance due to the large sample size of the dataset (N=1,195). Another study by Dyck and Holtzman (2013) examined the influence of humor styles on personal well-being within the context of social relationships and gender. This study also found that men scored higher than women on the aggressive humor style scale. Dyck and Holtzman explain this disparity in terms of social support; they suggest that aggressive humor is received with higher levels of social support from groups of males than females. Amongst males, aggressive or hostile humor is considered more behaviorally appropriate and elicits reactions similar to that of affiliative humor. For groups of women, aggressive humor is less accepted and may be misinterpreted as hostility. Therefore, aggressive humor is perceived as less maladaptive in men than in women.

There are mixed findings in the recent literature regarding the influence of humor style



and humor appreciation on overall well-being. Several researchers have found humor style to be a significant predictor of individual personality, emotional intelligence, social competence, and psychological well-being (Edwards & Martin, 2014; Gignac, Karatamoglou, Wee, & Palacios, 2014; Proctor, Maltby, & Linley, 2011; Yip & Martin, 2006). However, as of yet, humor style has not been shown to be associated with humor appreciation. Gignac et al. (2014) examined the relationship between humor styles and humor appreciation, but were unable to find a significant relationship between humor appreciation, emotional intelligence and humor style.

In the current study, I used six stand-up comedy performances of individuals who serve as examples (one male and one female comedian) of each distinct humor style (aggressive, affiliative, and self-defeating). A comedian exemplar for a self-enhancing humor style was not included in this experiment due to the internal nature of this particular style and an inability to reasonably depict this type of humor in a stand-up comedy routine. I chose stand-up comedy routines as a way to portray specific humor styles as opposed to only positive or negative humor as used by Gignac et al. In their experiment, the researchers used clips from the TV show America's Funniest Home Videos to assess participants' humor appreciation. These categories for these videos were either aggressive or non-aggressive humor directed at either children or animals (Gignac et al., 2014).

I hypothesize that participants who self-identify as using a particular humor style would find the corresponding comedians to be the funniest. Furthermore, I hypothesize that men would find the aggressive and self-defeating comedians significantly funnier than women.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Eighty-five John Carroll undergraduate students (50 females, 35 males) volunteered their

time in order to partially fulfill a course requirement. All APA ethical guidelines were followed in the treatment of participants.

### **Materials**

First, I conducted a pilot study in order to verify that the selected comedy routines and comedians did exemplify each humor style. For this pilot study, I gathered a panel of six other John Carroll Psychology students (three men and three women) and trained them on the various humor styles involved in this study. Next, I compiled video clips of one male and one female comedian that I believed best exemplified each humor style. Then, I had each member of the panel watch a clip of each of the different comedians and rate each comedian on how much their performance represented each of the humor style categories. I used these ratings to validate my selection of comedian exemplars with significant inter-rater reliabilities all greater than  $\alpha = 0.741$ .

Participants completed the Humor Style Questionnaire (HSQ) (Martin et al., 2003) in order to identify their humor style classification. Six comedy routines of comedians who exemplify either affiliative (Jim Gaffigan & Ellen DeGeneres), self-defeating (Louis C.K. & Phyllis Diller), or aggressive (Anthony Jeselnik & Amy Schumer) humor styles were used to assess humor appreciation. The videos were all obtained from YouTube and edited to approximately three-minute segments that seemed to best exemplify the desired humor style. See Appendix for the links to the edited comedy routine videos.

### **Procedure**

Participants identified their gender and then completed the HSQ. After completing the HSQ, participants watched the six comedy routines presented in a random order. After viewing each video, participants rated how funny they found the comedian from 1 (not at all funny) to 7

(extremely funny). After viewing all six videos, participants ranked the comedians in order from funniest to least funny.

### Results

Participants' responses on the HSQ were totaled for each humor style category, and participants were assigned a humor style determined by their highest scoring category compared to the mean of the current sample for the corresponding humor style category. Seven participants (5 females, 2 males) scored at similar levels in two or more of the humor style scales and could not be assigned to any one humor style category. These participants were not included in the subsequent ANOVA involving this variable.

A Chi-square analysis for the 78 participants that I could assign to humor style category indicated that men were more likely to endorse an aggressive humor style (males=16, females=8). Women were more likely to consider themselves as having an affiliative humor style (males=4, females=24). Men and women endorsed a self-defeating humor style equally (men=13, women=13)  $\chi^2(2, N = 78) = 15.472, p < .001$ .

Next, I ran a 2x3x6 (Participant Gender by Participant Humor Style by Comedian) mixed model ANOVA with Comedian as the within subject factor and Participant Gender and Participant Humor Style as the between subject factors. The results of this ANOVA indicated that there was no significant main effect for Participant Humor Style ( $F < 1$ ) and humor style was not involved in any significant interactions. Therefore, Participant Humor Style was removed from the model. In doing so, I was then able to use data from all participants in the subsequent ANOVA. Means and standard deviations obtained in the following analysis are shown in Table 1.

A 2x6 (Participant Gender by Comedian) mixed model ANOVA with Comedian as the

within subject factor indicated a significant main effect for Comedian  $F(5, 415)= 32.144, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .279$ , a significant main effect for Participant Gender,  $F(1, 83)= 6.077, p < .016, \eta_p^2 = .068$ , and a significant interaction for Comedian and Participant Gender,  $F(5, 415)= 19.171, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .188$ .

Due to the interaction between Comedian and Participant Gender, simple effects were examined. A test of simple effects for Participant Gender within Comedian showed that there was a significant difference in perceived humor between male and female participants for three of the four negative humor style comedians: Louis C.K.,  $F(1, 83)= 14.131, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .145$ , Amy Schumer,  $F(1, 83)= 15.706, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .159$ , and Anthony Jeselneck,  $F(1, 83)= 32.273, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .28$ . Men found these comedians significantly funnier than did women. There was also a difference in perceived humor between male and female participants for Ellen DeGeneres,  $F(1, 83)= 28.452, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .255$ . Women found Ellen to be significantly funnier than did the men. There was no difference between men and women in their evaluations of Phyllis Diller and Jim Gaffigan ( $p > .2$ ). Overall, Phyllis was considered to be the least funny of the comedians (mean rating of 2.72) and Jim was considered the funniest (mean rating of 4.27).

### Discussion

The primary goal of this experiment was to determine whether or not individual humor style could serve as a predictor of humor appreciation in others. There were no significant results for this primary purpose, I did not find a relationship between humor style and humor appreciation. However, I did find evidence that men and women differentially preferred different comedians. Also, I found that men were more likely to report using an aggressive humor style and women were more likely to report using an affiliative humor style.

Regarding the primary goal, the current results were consistent with that of Gignac et al.

(2014) who were also unable to find a relationship between humor styles and humor appreciation. Both this present study and that of Gignac et al. used videos as a means of representing humor style appreciation. Perhaps further research in this area should utilize another media for conveying different humor styles to the participants.

Furthermore, although the comedians in this study were determined to be highly representative of their respective humor styles, they were not all considered to be uniformly funny. In other words, some of the comedians were extremely disliked or preferred by all participants. For example, participants consistently rated Jim Gaffigan as the funniest comedian and Phyllis Diller as the least funny, regardless of any other determining factor (gender, humor style, etc.). This discrepancy for Phyllis is likely due to the fact that her comedy routine was the most outdated and may not have appealed to the younger participants. Also, several participants admitted to having pre-conceived negative attitudes towards certain comedians, skipping their videos entirely, and assigning them a rating of “Not at all funny.” Future researchers examining this topic should attempt to find exemplars of the various humor styles that are more uniform in terms of funniness and should try to avoid using comedians that participants may have pre-established feelings towards.

Although I did not find support for my first hypothesis, the findings of this study do in fact support my second hypothesis that men would find the negative humor style comedians funnier than would the women. The men in this study rated the negative comedians: Anthony Jeselnik (aggressive), Amy Schumer (aggressive), and Louis C.K. (self-defeating) significantly funnier than did the women, with the exception of Phyllis Diller. In addition to finding the negative humor style comedians funnier, the men in this study were also significantly more likely than the women to report using an aggressive humor style. However, men and women

were equally likely to report using a self-defeating humor style based on the results of the HSQ.

One possible explanation for the discrepancy in aggressive humor style between men and women may be that men are more likely to be reinforced for endorsing an aggressive humor style than are women. Dyck and Holtzman (2013) examined the relationship between well-being and humor styles with respect to social relationships and gender. According to the results of their study, aggressive humor styles may be related to more social support in men but lower social support in women. However, another study conducted by Saroglou, Lacour, and Demeure (2010) found that men who identified as having an aggressive humor style were more likely to be divorced and have lower retrospective relationship quality. Conversely, men who endorsed positive humor styles such as affiliative or self-enhancing humor styles were more likely to have higher levels of relationship satisfaction and lower levels of divorce.

In conclusion, although I found no statistical evidence in support of the primary hypothesis, I found significant evidence that men preferred the negative comedians more than women. Also, I found that men were significantly more likely to report using aggressive humor while women were significantly more likely to report using affiliative humor. This discrepancy is likely due to the fact that men are more likely to be reinforced in social settings for using aggressive humor than women. Further research should be conducted to examine the role of gender in determining humor style and its effects on the well-being of men and women.

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Table 1. *Means and Standard Deviations of Humor Ratings for Comedians based on Participant Gender*

Comedian	Gender					
	Male		Female		Overall	
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
<b>Aggressive</b>						
Anthony*	3.8	1.368	2.22	1.183	2.87	1.478
Amy*	3.46	1.4	2.28	1.31	2.76	1.461
<b>Self-Defeating</b>						
Louis*	4.86	1.141	3.72	1.512	4.19	1.476
Phyllis	2.51	1.245	2.86	1.229	2.72	1.24
<b>Affiliative</b>						
Jim	4.37	1.003	4.2	1.471	4.27	1.295
Ellen*	3.11	1.231	4.48	1.111	3.92	1.338
Overall	3.686	0.722	3.293	0.721		

Note: *Male, n= 35, Female, n= 50.*

\* *Denotes statistically significant difference between male and female participants.*

*Appendix A*

Links to Edited Youtube Videos

Amy

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rPS9LoVzHec>

Anthony

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o2yXlmGuLcA>

Ellen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N4fErricgMc>

Jim

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GRCFpY5gadh>

Louis

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z5zPu-8SG8g>

Phyllis

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xr27z8WYJ88>

*Note: For copyright purposes, all videos are labeled as private. Contact the author for permission to view the videos.*