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The Link between Humor and Personality

Alexander R. Hawley

The University of Akron, arh183@zips.uakron.edu

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The Link Between Humor and Personality

Alexander Hawley

The University of Akron

Abstract

This study sought to expand upon the research on humor and personality by attempting to find connections between the two through a digital survey. The participants of this study were 51 individuals obtained through social media that were 74.5% women, 23.5% men, and 2% non-binary. The Humor Styles Questionnaire and Midlife Development Inventory were used to assess humor styles and personality factors. Then, a correlation matrix was computed to examine associations between the two sets of variables. Four significant relationships were found: self-enhancing and openness to experience, self-enhancing and extraversion, aggressive and agreeableness, and self-defeating and neuroticism. These results can be used to make inferences about each variable. For example, those who are extroverted are more likely to make self-enhancing jokes while those who tend to tease others are more likely to be agreeable. Although there were not many significant relationships, more seemed to be present when controlling for gender and ethnicity, such as the connections between affiliative and openness to experience and aggressive and neuroticism. This can be used to say that certain genders or ethnicity are more likely to have a relationship between humor styles and personality factors compared to others. This information can offer a different perspective, compared to previous research, as well as a method of succeeding in the workplace and improving relationships by making jokes or understanding an individual's personality through the information they provide.

The Link Between Humor and Personality

It has been established that many utilize one of several ways of expressing humor when with friends and family. The connection between these humor styles and personality factors is not yet well understood. These would help us make assumptions about people and how to interact with them as one can infer other characteristics from the few aspects they know. In this case, the interactions between individual humor styles and personality factors could potentially help make inferences about each other. This connection implies that individuals high on certain factors of personality could have a higher likelihood of using certain humor styles or, vice versa, individuals who favor specific humor styles could show signs of particular personality factors. Along with that relationship, there could also be some characteristics controlling this relationship, such as gender or race. The current study attempted to investigate the relationships between humor and personality. First, the terms will be defined.

Humor has four distinct styles that are typically determined by the Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ): affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003). The affiliative humor style is humor that betters a group by relieving tensions and improving relationships. Similarly, self-enhancing humor is often used for relieving problems and stressors, but this humor style's primary focus is maintaining one's psychological well-being rather than others. While the previous two humor styles attempt to achieve their goals without the expense of anyone, the last two are much more negative in their approach. The aggressive humor style uses various methods of putting others down, such as mocking or sarcasm, to make everyone laugh and will often be used to manipulate others. Lastly, self-defeating humor seeks to put the user down by saying hurtful things about themselves to obtain approval or entrance into a group.

Personality is usually categorized in the Big Five Taxonomy: openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Periodically, more categories will be added, such as agency in the Midlife Development Inventory (MIDI; Lachman & Weaver, 1997). Each of these traits are measured on a scale that has a counter term for classification when participants score low in a category. For example, those who score low on an extraversion scale would be considered highly introverted and not ones to seek out excitement and interactions. Alternatively, those who score high in extraversion are assertive and outgoing. Ergo, if someone scored high on openness to experience, they would be a creative person who often challenges themselves with new experiences, while those who score low often dislike changes and will reject new concepts. The same goes for conscientiousness, as those who score high will be highly aware of their surroundings and crave some sort of order in their lives while those who score low in conscientiousness will lack self-discipline and go through life with little to no direction. Agreeableness is a measure of one's stubbornness: those who score high in agreeableness are trusting and compliant with new ideas while those who score low are persistent with their beliefs and will tend to have less care for what others want. Next, neuroticism could be one of the more psychologically damaging personality factors as it measures a person's emotional stability. Those who score low in neuroticism will be the most emotionally stable, with a calm and worry-free demeanor, while those who score high in neuroticism tend to be more anxious and temperamental. Lastly, agency is used to describe those who are more dominant, with high scorers being more forceful and insistent while low scorers are much more reserved and less confident in themselves.

A multitude of relationships have been found between humor and personality as the topic has been quite popular in the field of research. For instance, while the HSQ was in development

and being tested, they chose to run correlations between the HSQ and more expansive personality scales, the scale taking priority being the NEO-PI-R scale (Costa & McCrae, 1992), to find relationships between the two (Martin et al., 2013). The results varied with each humor style having significant correlations. Affiliative was positively correlated with extraversion and openness to experience, so those with an affiliative humor style seemed to be more active and sociable with others. Then, those with a self-enhancing humor style were positively correlated with extraversion, agreeableness, and openness to experience as well as negatively related to neuroticism. This means that self-enhancing humor is doing what it is supposed to, which is to keep emotional stability, so much so that it is able to keep this emotional stability with new people and ideas. Next, the aggressive and self-defeating humor styles were positively related to neuroticism and negatively related to agreeableness and conscientiousness, meaning that those with these humor styles tend to be more emotionally unstable as well as more careless with the people they interact with; however, self-defeating humor had a stronger relationship with neuroticism than aggressive humor, meaning that a self-defeating humor style is more likely to show signs of anxiety and worry. Though these relationships prove useful for making hypotheses, one must examine how they change between studies.

The associations between humor and personality were also examined by Ozyeşil, Deniz, and Kesici, who found slightly different results (2013). This study sought to find a method of predicting an individual's humor style through the presence of personality factors as well as their opposites and used correlations to help find the predictors that could potentially be the strongest. With the previous relationships with affiliative humor style, this study found that it also had a significant positive relationship with agreeableness and conscientiousness, meaning that those who often use affiliative humor tend to be aware of the people around them while being

sympathetic and caring. The relationships found to be significant with the self-enhancing humor style were the same aside from it no longer having a relationship with agreeableness, meaning that a self-enhancing humor style does not necessarily mean one is going also be supportive or understanding of others. Next, the aggressive humor style lost its positive correlation with neuroticism in favor of negative relationships with extraversion and openness to experience. This addition means that those who are more aggressive with their humor are not necessarily mentally unstable, but they do tend to be less talkative and less curious around other people. Lastly, self-defeating humor lost all of its significant relationships except for its negative relationship with conscientiousness making them less caring and organized. This information should be adequate for making inferences about the results of this study.

Many assumptions can be drawn from prior research, but it seems like there are many similarities in the results that we used to make hypotheses. Those who have affiliative humor will most likely be more willing to begin conversations while calmly controlling them, so this humor style will most likely be positively correlated with agreeableness and extraversion as well as negatively correlated with neuroticism. As for those who have a self-enhancing humor style, they will be good at regulating their emotions and potentially be observant of their surroundings as new experiences may lead to a situation where they do not know how to stay emotionally stable. This style would mean that they may be positively correlated with conscientiousness as well as negatively correlated with openness to experience and neuroticism. Those with an aggressive humor style will most likely make bad jokes no matter what situation they are in and may not want to be in a position where they cannot make those jokes, so they may be negatively correlated with agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience. Lastly, those with a self-defeating style of humor would most likely be worried about what is happening around them

and what people around them may think of them, so self-defeating humor could be positively correlated with conscientiousness, agreeableness, and neuroticism.

Methods

Participants

The sixty-one participants were acquired through a social media post (51 after a process of elimination through incompleteness) and had an abundance of females with 38 participants identifying as women (74.5%), 12 as men (23.5%), and 1 self-identified as non-binary (2%). The race demographic was majorly white-dominated with the 50 participants that identified as White/Caucasian (98%) while 1 participant identified as Black/African American (2%). However, there was slightly more variability in ethnicity with 2 participants identifying as Hispanic/Latino (3.9%), 7 identifying as having multiple ethnicities (13.7%), 39 identifying as not Hispanic/Latino (76.5%), and 3 participants that preferred not to answer (5.9%). Lastly, the age of the participants ranged between 19 and 77 years old and had a mean of 42.4 years old ($SD = 17.7$).

Materials

The Humor Styles Questionnaire consists of 32 self-reported items (Martin et al., 2003). This survey seeks to determine the participant's humor style by providing statements that are related to each humor style: affiliative (e.g., 'I rarely make other people laugh by telling funny stories about myself'), self-enhancing (e.g., 'If I'm by myself and I'm feeling unhappy, I make an effort to think of something funny to cheer myself up'), aggressive (e.g., 'If I don't like someone, I often use humor or teasing to put them down'), and self-defeating (e.g., 'I let people laugh at me or make fun at my expense more than I should'). These statements are then rated on

a seven-point Likert Scale labeled from one to seven with the following labels: 1 (totally disagree), 4 (neither agree nor disagree), and 7 (totally agree). A slider was used for this section of the survey, so missing answers were assumed to be a 1. The sum of each set of ratings for humor styles were found to indicate the level to which the individual used each humor style, with statements one, three, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-five, and thirty-one being reverse scored. Each set of statements seemed to have some interrelationships, with Cronbach alpha coefficient scores of .150 for affiliative humor, .285 for self-enhancing humor, .334 for aggressive humor, and .391 for self-defeating humor.

The Midlife Development Inventory is a 31-item survey that is used to assess six personality factors (Lachman & Weaver, 1997). This scale assesses these factors by using a four-point Likert Scale to indicate the degree to which each adjective describes them. Personality is divided into six factors that each have several adjectives to describe them: agency (self-confident, forceful, assertive, outspoken, and dominant), agreeableness (helpful, warm, caring, softhearted, and sympathetic), openness to experience (creative, imaginative, intelligent, curious, broadminded, sophisticated, and adventurous), neuroticism (moody, worrying, nervous, and calm), extraversion (outgoing, friendly, lively, active, and talkative), and conscientiousness (organized, responsible, hardworking, careless, and thorough). However, the adventurous item was unintentionally left out when distributing the survey. The participants have four options when indicating how much they can relate to each adjective: 1 (a lot), 2 (some), 3 (a little), and 4 (not at all). These options were flipped so one was 'not at all' and four was 'a lot' so there would be less confusion moving from the previous scale to this one. Interrelationships were found between these items: .505 for conscientiousness, .371 for extraversion, .643 for neuroticism, .450 for openness to experience, .529 for agreeableness, and .554 for agency.

Procedure

When participants obtained the link through social media, they were given a consent form that informed them about any risks as well as who to contact with any questions. Once the participant gave their consent, they were given items to answer about their demographics (age, gender, race, and ethnicity). Then, the participants were given items from the HSQ scale. This was followed by an attention check that asked them to pick a specific letter from five options for which fifty of the fifty-one (98%) participants answered correctly. Lastly, participants were given the items from the MIDI scale.

Results

Table 1 shows the relationships found when conducting Pearson correlations for the variables of interest in which four significant relationships were found. A positive relationship was found between the aggressive humor style and agreeableness, $r(49) = .428$, $p = .002$. Negative relationships were also found between the following variables: self-enhancing humor and openness to experience, $r(49) = -.324$, $p = .020$, self-enhancing humor and extraversion, $r(49) = -.513$, $p < .001$, and between a self-defeating humor style and neuroticism, $r(49) = -.377$, $p = .006$.

Table 1

Correlations between Humor Styles and Personality Factors

		Affiliative	Self- Enhancing	Aggressive	Self- Defeating
Agency	Pearson's r	0.063	-0.236	-0.273	0.253
Agreeableness	Pearson's r	0.036	-0.222	0.428**	0.175
Openness to Experience	Pearson's r	0.043	-0.324*	-0.109	-0.052
Neuroticism	Pearson's r	-0.11	0.098	0.059	-0.377**
Extraversion	Pearson's r	-0.022	-0.512***	0.096	0.026
Conscientiousness	Pearson's r	0.1	-0.171	0.074	0.263

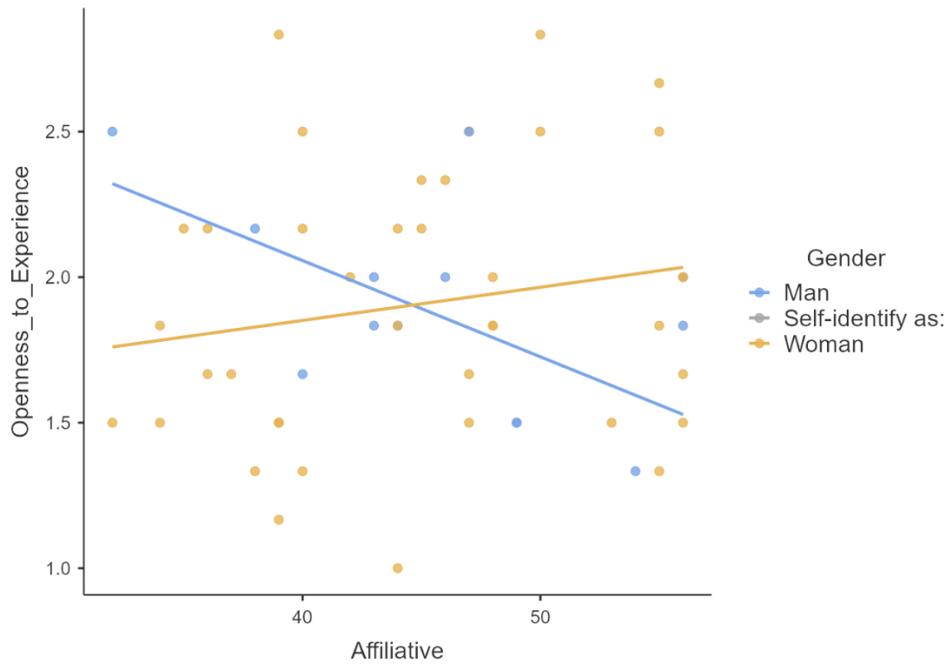
Note. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Although these seem to be the only significant relationships, there may be a problem when trying to find relationships. This problem can be seen by grouping the data for some relationships to see whether the relationships are impacting each other or not. For example, it is shown in Table 1 that an affiliative humor style and openness to experience do not have a relationship; however, men and women have a different relationship with the two variables (see Table 1). Women seem to have more of a negative relationship between affiliative and openness to experience while men have a negative relationship. This is also seen in the relationship between aggressive and neuroticism as there is no significant relationship in Table 1, but when

controlled for ethnicity (see Figure 2), those with multiple ethnicities seem to have a stronger relationship while those that are not Hispanic/Latino seem to have no relationship.

Figure 1

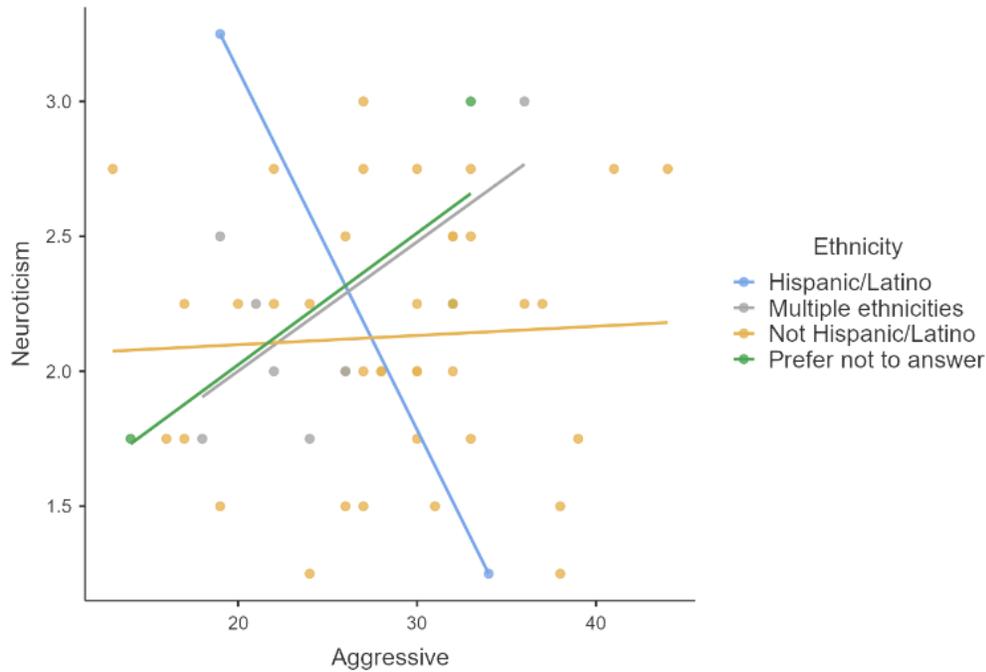
Correlation between affiliative and Openness to experience grouped by gender



Note. Affiliative humor style and openness to experience do not seem to have much of a relationship until the data are split into groups based on gender. Doing so results in men and women having different effects.

Figure 2

Correlation between Aggressive and Neuroticism grouped by ethnicity



Note. Aggressive humor style and neuroticism do not have much of a relationship until dividing the data into groups based on ethnicity. These groupings caused there to be a more significant relationship in those with multiple ethnicities compared to those that are not Hispanic/Latino.

Discussion

This study sought to find connections between humor and personality while finding possible control variables that impact their relationships: the results in this limited sample turned out to be far from the norm. The positive and negative correlations found in this study were found to either have the opposite or no relationship to previous studies (Martin et al., 2003; Ozyeşil et al., 2013). This can be happening for a variety of reasons, one of which can simply be due to regression from the mean or because the MIDI scale that was used was not as accurate at

assessing personality as other personality scales. Since the MIDI scale has not been used to compare with humor styles, it may be leading to different observations. However, there are other explanations for the differences.

Another important explanation to consider could be that some personality factors are different from previously believed. For instance, the self-enhancing humor style is thought to be able to regulate emotions in any situation, but that could also mean that those who use this humor style often would want to avoid being in groups, so they do not have to regulate their emotions as much. This would explain why self-enhancing humor was negatively related to the openness to experience as well as extraversion, as introverts have to regulate emotions more when they run out of energy in a group. They may also attempt to avoid new experiences to avoid being in a situation where they would not understand how to regulate their emotions in. Next, those who use an aggressive humor style may be thought of as always being against those that are around them, but then that would leave them with no one to tease. This would explain the positive relationship between aggressive and agreeableness because aggressive humor style users may want to keep people closer to them to learn more about an individual to make fun of while keeping the friends that they can make fun of. Lastly, self-defeating style of humor users are mostly believed to be the most mentally unstable of the humor styles because it can be mentally damaging to put oneself down at the expense of others, but there is a possibility that they are mentally stable, and something is keeping them from using other humor styles. For instance, there could be a lack of knowledge about humor so it could be the only style they can think of to use. Also, self-defeating humor can be seen as an indicator of someone who has gone through some sort of traumatic event or events that make them believe that they believe that they deserve to be made fun of. While this does not describe emotional stability, this sample could have been

taken from a sample of the population that has overcome their trauma and became emotionally stable while holding onto that style of humor. These differences in results from previous results could also vary for different groups.

Table 1 suggests that the affiliative humor style does not have a relationship with openness to experience, but when controlled for gender, the results slightly change. Shown in Figure 1 is this change as men seem to be more likely to be less open to new experiences if they often use affiliative humor while women are more likely to be open to fresh ideas and encounters. This could suggest that women are better at bringing a group together with humor, no matter the circumstance, while men prefer to reject new experiences as they may not be good at using humor to bring the group together in new scenarios. This effect change is also present when the relationship between aggressive and neuroticism, also not said to be significant, is controlled for ethnicity (only multiple ethnicities and not Hispanic/Latino are examined). Neuroticism and aggressive humor seem to be related for non-Hispanic/Latino individuals, but those who have multiple ethnicities are more likely to be neurotic when they often use an aggressive humor style; maybe meaning that those with multiple ethnicities are more anxious about their aggressive sense of humor than those who are not Hispanic/Latino. Along with these interactions, this information can prove useful in a variety of scenarios.

The results from this study can be used to expand the knowledge of humor personality while also having utility in interactions to better relationships. Considering how the results of the current study diverge from studies (e.g., Martin et al., 2003; Ozyeşil et al., 2013), they can be used to further develop future studies by giving researchers varying relationships to consider. The results can also be used in benefitting relationships as inferences can be made about those that are not well known. For instance, if a new acquaintance makes a joke using a certain humor

style, one can make inferences about their personality and vice versa(e.g., if someone makes a self-defeating joke, one can assume that they have a high chance of being emotionally stable). This can also be used in the workplace to get in a better relationship with coworkers or one's boss as one may know their personality, so they can make jokes that would appeal to that person to make improve their chances of succeeding on the job. Though the results yielded significant conclusions that can have important applications, there were a few faults to this study.

A majority of the limitations of this study lie within the survey construction and data collection. To begin, the MIDI scale was not the best for assessing personality as it relied heavily on asking participants to assess themselves where most would likely rate themselves high on positive adjectives like caring and creative while rating themselves low on negative adjectives like moody and careless. Also, pertaining to creating the online survey, the slider that was used for the HSQ proved to be confusing when analyzing the data as participants would often leave the slider on 1 when rating statements, which would classify that data as missing. Concerning the problems with data collection, the primary hindrance would be the overall sample size. The sample size was too small to make many definite conclusions about the population. Demographic variability was also highly lacking in terms of race and ethnicity variability as there was such an overwhelming amount of white/Caucasian and non-Hispanic/Latino participants that the data could not effectively split the data by either trait. Additionally, this study was more likely to favor individuals who have access to technology as it was distributed electronically. Another problem with the data collection would be the method used to obtain the data as social media seemed like a good place to find a high variety of people, but it ended up being highly skewed towards white individuals. Ergo, distributing the survey through The University of Akron or another method would have been a better choice with the main problem being that it would not

be a descriptor of the entire population, rather the people who are able to attend college. Though there were several problems with the study throughout its process, conclusions can still be made from the data that were obtained.

In conclusion to this study, the data suggest that there are connections between personality and humor; subsets of each variable have several relationships with each other. Though the study of humor and personality is still expanding, this study was able to expand our knowledge on the subject with correlations and control variables. The results were unexpected as our hypotheses were proven wrong, so this study offers a different perspective of how humor styles and personality can be related as the relationships found in the current study differ from those of other studies for various reasons. The reasons could have had something to do with problems with the scales used or the method of data collection. However, the reasoning could have also been due to humor styles and personality factors not having the same previously believed relationships. Ergo, those who utilize more positive humor styles (i.e., affiliative and self-enhancing) have a chance to be more negative and reserved than previously thought. Furthermore, negative humor users (i.e., aggressive and self-defeating humor users) have the potential to be more positive and emotionally stable than previously believed. There is also a potential application for relationships as one can improve relationships through the humor style that the individual is most likely to have. The current study explored humor, personality, and different ways that future researchers can use to approach these two variables from a different standpoint.

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