



# Is the use of humor associated with anger management? The assessment of individual differences in humor styles in Spain



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## ABSTRACT

Individual differences in the use of humor are a growing topic in personality research. This paper presents the psychometric analysis of the Spanish version of the Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ; Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003). A total of 1068 adults whose ages ranged from 18 to 65 years participated in five different studies. First, we tested the dimensionality and internal consistency of the instrument; we also replicated previous relationships between humor styles and well-being and personality (Big Five and HEXACO models). Second, we obtained new external validity evidence regarding the role of humor styles in anger management. Our results showed that self-enhancing humor was associated with a higher ability to reduce angry feelings and to avoid the external expression of anger. Higher scores on maladaptive humor styles, such as aggressive and self-defeating humor, were correlated with a greater inclination to express anger toward other people and with an increased tendency to engage in anger suppression, respectively. Results suggest that the HSQ is a reliable and valid option for measuring humor styles in the Spanish population.

## 1. Introduction

During the past 20 years, humor as an individual difference variable has generated growing interest in the field of personality research (Heintz, 2017; Martin, 2004; Svebak, 2010; Thorson & Powell, 1993). In fact, authors such as Ruch (1998) asserted that humor would become one of the main reference research topics in personality studies. One of the most prominent topics in the area of humor research has been the establishment of individual differences in humor styles, isolating their correlates, theoretical implications and applied consequences, among others.

Humor styles have been defined as behavioral tendencies related to the use of humor in everyday life. Although different approaches have operationalized humor styles (e.g., Craik, Lampert, & Nelson, 1996; Ruch & Heintz, 2016), Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, and Weir (2003) reported one of the most well-known contributions. Following these authors, humor styles would be divided into four independent although related dimensions: affiliative, aggressive, self-enhancing, and self-defeating. To test this model and to explore the relationships of humor styles with other traits and behaviors, they developed the Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ).

The topic of humor styles has produced a considerable amount of research and has been applied to a variety of fields, such as basic personality dimensions (Mendiburo-Seguel, Páez, & Martínez-Sánchez, 2015), pathological personality traits (Zeigler-Hill, McCabe, & Vrabel, 2016), health and psychological well-being (Ruch & Heintz, 2013), psychosocial adjustment in adolescence (Fox, Hunter, & Jones, 2016), suicide-related outcomes (Stockton, Tucker, Kleiman, & Wingate, 2016), relationship satisfaction in dating couples (Caird & Martin, 2014), etc.

The HSQ (Martin et al., 2003) focuses on the way in which individuals use humor in their social relationships and when confronting potentially stressful events. This measure consists of 32 items that evaluate the different abovementioned dimensions. *Affiliative humor* is linked with the enhancement of personal interactions. It is characterized by saying amusing remarks or telling jokes, being considered a type of benevolent humor. *Self-enhancing humor* is related to the maintenance of a humorous outlook during adverse or harmful situations. Hence, it constitutes the closest dimension to the view of humor as an emotion regulation strategy (Martin, 2007; Martin, Kuiper, Olinger, & Dance, 1993). *Aggressive humor* is oriented to denote superiority over other people. In other words, it refers to the hostile

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expression of humor for the purpose of ridiculing others under the semblance of seeking mere amusement or fun. Lastly, the use of *self-defeating humor* seeks out social acceptance and the approval of others at one's own expense. Individuals who use this humor style tend to disparage themselves (or to expose themselves to possible situations of ridicule) with the prospect of avoiding dealing with a problem and hiding negative emotions. It should be noted here that affiliative and self-enhancing humor styles are categorized as positive and adaptive humorous behaviors, whereas aggressive and self-defeating humor styles have a relatively negative and damaging nature (Martin, 2007).

The HSQ has been used in numerous studies, which have verified its usefulness and good psychometric properties (Chen & Martin, 2007; Martin et al., 2003; Saraglou & Scariot, 2002). Martin et al. (2003) reported adequate internal consistencies for all dimensions of the HSQ (Cronbach's  $\alpha \geq .77$ ). Other independent studies have also found high reliability for the affiliative, self-enhancing, and self-defeating dimensions (e.g., Sirigatti, Penzoa, Giannetti, & Stefanile, 2014). Nevertheless, the available data regarding the internal consistency of aggressive humor are more inconsistent (see Ruch & Heintz, 2016). As regards the main intercorrelations among humor styles, a positive association between affiliative and self-enhancing humor has consistently been found (Martin et al., 2003; Stockton et al., 2016). In addition, there is evidence that aggressive and self-defeating humors are positively related to one another (Martin et al., 2003; Vaughan, Zeigler-Hill, & Arnau, 2014). Lastly, it is important to note that inconsistent results have been reported for all other intercorrelations (Ford, Lappi, & Holden, 2016; Ruch & Heintz, 2013; Sirigatti et al., 2014; Vaughan et al., 2014).

The main objective of the present research was to develop a comprehensive assessment of the HSQ in independent large samples of the Spanish population. To achieve this goal, we performed traditional psychometric analyses to examine the internal consistency and factor structure of the HSQ. Moreover, we conducted three studies to obtain external validity evidence by replicating the relationships between humor styles and psychological well-being and personality variables.

Regarding psychological well-being variables, we expected to find a positive relationship between adaptive humor styles (i.e., affiliative and self-enhancing) and positive psychological well-being dimensions (e.g., happiness, satisfaction with life, and hope) (Kazarian & Martin, 2006). Higher scores on these humor styles would be associated with lower scores on trait anxiety and depression, that is, negative indicators of well-being (Martin et al., 2003). By contrast, a maladaptive humor style such as self-defeating humor would be negatively associated with positive psychological well-being, and positively associated with anxiety and depression (Dyck & Holtzman, 2013). According to Martin et al. (2003) and Ruch and Heintz (2013), we expected to find zero correlations between aggressive humor and positive and negative indicators of well-being.

Concerning the personality dimensions, one of the goals of our research was to analyze whether the pattern of relationships between humor styles and personality traits is similar when considering two different models of personality (i.e., Big Five and HEXACO). In the Big Five model, we expected affiliative and self-enhancing humor styles to be correlated with higher scores on extraversion (Mendiburo-Seguel et al., 2015) and lower scores on neuroticism (Ruch & Heintz, 2013). We also expected to find a positive correlation between self-enhancing humor and agreeableness and openness to experience (Martin et al., 2003). Following these authors, aggressive humor was likely to be associated with lower agreeableness and conscientiousness and higher neuroticism. Finally, self-defeating humor was likely to be correlated with higher neuroticism and lower conscientiousness (Martin et al., 2003; Ruch & Heintz, 2013). Moreover, regarding the relationship between humor styles and the HEXACO dimensions (Vrabel, Zeigler-Hill, & Shango, 2017), higher scores on affiliative and self-enhancing humor styles would indicate higher scores on honesty-humility, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience.

Considering the negative humor styles, self-defeating and especially aggressive humor were likely to have similar but opposite patterns, that is, negative associations with honesty-humility, emotionality, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. To improve the comparison of the results related to these personality models and the use of humor, in addition to examining the linear relationships reported previously (e.g., Martin et al., 2003; Vrabel et al., 2017), we also explored potential curvilinear associations. To our knowledge, this is the first empirical study that has examined curvilinear relationships between personality traits and humor styles.

Finally, with the aim of obtaining new external validity evidence, we examined the potential relationship between individual differences in the use of humor and anger-related measures. Anger has been conceptualized as an emotional state characterized by angry feelings or episodes derived from unsatisfied personal needs (Spielberger, 1999). Traditional humor approaches have suggested that humor could be associated with coping with negative emotional states such as, for example, anger (Martin, 2007). For this reason, in this research we explored the relationship between humor styles and trait anger, anger expression, and anger control. In particular, given that self-enhancing humor is considered a personal coping mechanism or reappraisal strategy (Martin et al., 2003), we expected this type of humor to be associated with a higher control of anger. Furthermore, given that harmful HSQ dimensions (i.e., aggressive humor and self-defeating humor) have been correlated with maladaptive personality traits (Veselka, Schermer, Martin, & Vernon, 2010; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2016), negative emotional adjustment indicators (Vaughan et al., 2014), and hostile or aggressive behaviors (Martin, 2007), we expected these injurious humor styles to be related to a greater expression of anger. More specifically, aggressive humor, which is oriented to others, was likely to be positively correlated with the external expression of anger; by contrast, self-defeating humor, which is oriented to oneself, was likely to be positively associated with the internal expression of anger. To our knowledge, there is no empirical evidence of the relationship between humor styles and anger management.

### 1.1. Development of the Spanish version of the HSQ: initial stages

Two bilingual specialists translated the 32 original items of the HSQ (eight items for each humor style) to Spanish, and then, two different bilingual specialists translated items to English. After that, the new and the original English versions were compared to check that no differences could be found in items in the translations (Hambleton & de Jong, 2003). Furthermore, another four experts completing test construction reviewed these items to get validity evidence based on the test content. The evaluation consisted of identifying the humor style (target dimension) to which each item belonged as well as rating the representativeness or relevance of each item for its dimension. Additionally, the items were evaluated according to classic formal criteria (Angleitner, John, & Löhr, 1986; Carretero-Dios, Benítez, Delgado-Rico, Ruch, & López-Benítez, 2014): comprehension (i.e., to what extent the item was correctly understood), ambiguity (i.e., whether the item could be interpreted in another way), and clarity (i.e., to what extent the item was concise/accurate/direct). All of the items showed adequate content validity indexes (CVIs) above .70; an inter-judge agreement Kappa index above the .40–.59 reference range).

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1. Sample

Five different samples ( $N = 1068$ ) were recruited to develop the Spanish version of the HSQ.

Sample 1 (*construction sample*) consisted of 300 adults (159 females and 141 males) with a mean age of 29.47 ( $SD = 11.53$ ; range from 18 to 60). Almost half of the participants held a university degree (44%),

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