



How does gratitude affect the relationship between positive humor styles and suicide-related outcomes?



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ABSTRACT

Gratitude and positive humor styles may be important protective factors against suicide ideation that are rarely investigated. This study investigated whether positive humor styles influence the experience of suicide ideation and the identification of reasons for living through levels of gratitude. Participants ($N = 166$) were undergraduate students oversampled for recent suicidal ideation. They completed self-report measures of affiliative and self-enhancing humor, tendency to experience thoughts and feelings of gratitude, reasons for living, and suicide ideation in the previous two weeks. A multiple-mediator model indicated that affiliative, but not self-enhancing humor indirectly reduced risk for suicidal ideation through gratitude. Clinical implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Suicide is the second leading cause of death among young adults and suicide is the tenth leading cause of death for all age groups in the United States (Drapeau, McIntosh, & American Association of Suicidology, 2015). Traditionally, studies have investigated risk factors for suicide-related behaviors (i.e., suicide ideation, suicide attempts, and death by suicide), however, prominent scholars have called for more research investigating potential protective factors of suicide. In 2006, Wingate and Colleagues noted that the prevention of suicide would be furthered by the integration of new research findings from the field of positive psychology into the understanding and treatment of suicidal behavior (Wingate et al., 2006). Similarly, O'Connor and Nock (2014) asserted that a key future direction in psychological research pertaining to suicide is the increased identification and understanding of protective factors of suicide.

In line with the call for more literature on protective factors related to suicide, research has investigated the impact of humor usage on suicide. Recent work has identified that the way an individual uses humor may influence his or her level of suicide risk. Studies have linked humor to indicators of suicide risk and resilience, such as perceived social support and symptoms of psychopathology closely related to suicide. In a sample of psychiatric inpatients, higher levels of a sense of humor

have been correlated with lower levels of depression and anxiety symptoms as well as higher positive self-concept in those diagnosed with a depressive disorder (Kuiper, Martin, Olinger, Kazarian, & Jette, 1998). More specifically, research has identified two positive humor styles (affiliative and self-enhancing humor) that have been shown to relate to many indicators of suicide resilience, such as increased self-esteem, experience of positive emotions, optimism, and social support. Similarly, these humor styles have been linked to decreased feelings of loneliness and symptoms of depression and anxiety (Cecen, 2007; Hampes, 2005; Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003).

An *affiliative humor style* is characterized as using humor in efforts to enhance social relationships, reduce interpersonal tensions, and increase group cohesion (Martin et al., 2003). *Self-enhancing humor* is a self-accepting and non-hostile humor style that is used in efforts to decrease stress and distress by making jokes or thinking of funny elements about difficult circumstances. Research has indicated that both humor styles may be protective against important predictors of suicide, such as symptoms of depression, anxiety, and social disconnection (Martin et al., 2003).

Research linking positive humor styles and mental health symptoms has recently been extended to examine relationships between humor styles and more proximal predictors of suicide, such as suicide ideation, and theoretically driven constructs of empirical models of suicidal behavior. Tucker et al. (2013) demonstrated that affiliative humor was negatively correlated to suicide ideation in college students; whereas, self-enhancing humor was unrelated to levels of suicide ideation. Although only affiliative humor was related to suicide ideation, both

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humor styles were negatively related to thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness, the interpersonal predictors of suicide ideation outlined in the Interpersonal Theory of Suicide (Joiner, 2005). Affiliative humor even buffered the impact that these risk factors had on levels of recent suicide ideation. This research suggests that humor may play an important protective role against suicide ideation and may be an important personal strength that can be enhanced through therapeutic intervention.

Positive humor styles are not the only recently identified potential protective factors against suicide. Research has also demonstrated a strong protective relationship between feelings of gratefulness and suicide-related outcomes. Gratitude is considered to be a personality trait associated with noticing and appreciating the positive in life including benefits and gifts that can be credited to the kindness of other individuals (Kleiman, Adams, Kashdan, & Riskind, 2013; Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010). Gratitude has been linked to increased interpersonal wellness, an important element of suicide prevention (Joiner, 2005). Specifically, increased proneness to feelings of gratitude have been positively associated with increased social support, healthy interpersonal goals, and interpersonal connection (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Jordan, Masters, Hooker, Ruiz, & Smith, 2014; Lambert, Clark, Durtschi, Fincham, & Graham, 2010). Research has also linked gratitude to less social conflict, loneliness, and self-esteem concerns (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Jordan et al., 2014). Gratitude may not only influence the experience of interpersonal risk and resiliency factors of suicide, it may influence mental health symptoms associated with suicide such as symptoms of depression and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Research has indicated that increased gratitude prospectively predicts less symptoms of depression in longitudinal studies (Wood, Maltby, Gillett, Linley, & Joseph, 2008). Vietnam war veterans diagnosed with PTSD demonstrate lower levels of gratitude than those not diagnosed with the disorder (Kashdan, Uswatte, & Julian, 2006). Additionally, this daily diary study demonstrated that increased gratitude was related to increased positive affect and self-esteem above and beyond PTSD symptoms.

Despite literature indicating the interpersonal and emotional benefits of gratitude, it is an underused resiliency factor in suicide prevention (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002; Kleiman et al., 2013). Kleiman et al. (2013) demonstrated that increased levels of gratitude were prospectively related to increased meaning in life and decreased suicide ideation in a four week follow-up of college students. Similarly, the increased propensity to feel grateful has been linked to decreased suicide ideation and historical number of suicide attempts in Chinese adolescents (Li, Zhang, Li, Li, & Ye, 2012). The extant literature suggests that increased gratitude not only influences positive interpersonal and emotional wellness broadly (e.g., Wood et al., 2010), gratitude may affect levels of suicide ideation both directly and through its effect on important risk and resiliency factors of suicide (Kleiman et al., 2013; Li et al., 2012). More research is needed in regards to how proneness to gratitude relates to suicide ideation as only two studies have directly investigated this relationship.

One potentially fruitful area of this study is in determining how the use of gratitude is influenced by positive humor use and how this affects suicide ideation. Affiliative humor style has been linked to important interpersonal constructs such as lower levels of loneliness and higher levels of extraversion, intimacy and stronger interpersonal bonds (Hampes, 2005; Cecen, 2007; Martin et al., 2003). It may be that the use of affiliative humor impacts the amount of gratitude an individual experiences, as this humor use may increase interpersonal bonds and closeness. Thus, affiliative humor may decrease suicide ideation through increased feelings of gratefulness. Furthermore, self-enhancing humor is linked to positive emotionality, and is theorized to be a constructive coping strategy (Martin et al., 2003). Individuals who naturally use this humor style likely experience less distress when faced with a stressor. It stands to reason that because this humor style reduces perceived negativity of distressful circumstances, individuals who use this

humor style are more apt to find things in life to feel grateful for, even as they experience distressful circumstances. Thus, self-enhancing humor may be related to decreased suicide ideation through higher levels of gratitude. Despite humor and gratitude both being important character strengths that relate to general well-being (Kuiper, 2012), no research to date has empirically investigated the relationship between positive humor styles and proneness for feelings of gratitude.

1.1. Hypotheses

The current study investigated how the positive humor styles of affiliative and self-enhancing humor may encourage gratitude, protect individuals from suicide ideation, and increase a person's reasons for living. It was hypothesized that there would be a positive relationship between gratitude and both adaptive humor styles (affiliative and self-enhancing). Building upon these simple relationships, it was also hypothesized that affiliative humor would be indirectly related to both decreased suicide ideation and increased reasons for living through increased gratitude. A similar indirect effect was hypothesized for self-enhancing humor. Specifically, self-enhancing humor would be indirectly related to decreased suicide ideation and increased reasons for living through increased levels of gratitude.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants in this study were 166 students (72.29% female, 27.71% male) from a large state university. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 29, with a mean age of 19.76 years ($SD = 1.74$). The majority of participants (79.9%) self-identified as Caucasian, 3.0% as African-American, 7.5% as Native American, 1.8% as Biracial, 3.6% as Asian-American, and 4.2% as Hispanic. Twenty-two participants (13.25%) participants reported some level of suicidal ideation in the past two weeks.

Oversampling techniques were used to recruit study participants. All participants completed a prescreen questionnaire at the beginning of the semester. Those who identified some level of suicide ideation in the previous two weeks prior to completing the prescreen study questionnaire were recruited via email requests to participate in current study. Specifically, all students who endorsed recent suicide ideation (in the previous two weeks) were solicited for participation, while a much smaller percentage of students who did not endorse recent suicide ideation were contacted (5%). This study complied with the Institutional Review Board from the university.

2.2. Measures

Participants completed the following measures online.

2.2.1. Demographics questionnaire

Demographic information was obtained from participants including age, gender, and ethnicity.

2.2.2. Hopelessness Depression Symptom Questionnaire-Suicidality Subscale

The Hopelessness Depression Symptom Questionnaire-Suicidality Subscale (HDSQ-SS; Metalsky & Joiner, 1997) is a 4-item self-report measure of suicide ideation experienced in the previous two weeks. Responses are made on a 0 to 3 scale, with response values differing for each item. Higher scores on the HDSQ-SS indicate higher levels of suicide ideation in the past two weeks. The HDSQ-SS is a commonly used measure in suicide research and has been shown to demonstrate excellent internal consistency with college student populations (Cukrowicz et al., 2011; Joiner & Rudd, 1996; Tucker et al., 2013). The HDSQ-SS demonstrated excellent internal consistency in this sample ($\alpha = 0.90$).

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