



Gender differences in humour styles of young adolescents: Empathy as a mediator



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 18 November 2015
Received in revised form 23 April 2016
Accepted 9 May 2016
Available online 14 May 2016

Keywords:

Gender
Humour styles
Empathy
Mediator

ABSTRACT

Humour has its positive and negative features; negative humour leads to tension between two people. Moreover, there are gender differences in the use of humour. Previous research has demonstrated that males tend to prefer unfriendly humour. Aggressive behaviours are predicable by the level of empathy and may mediate the use of humour by males and females. To address this issue, the present study recruited 431 adolescents and used the Interpersonal Reactivity Inventory and the Humor Styles Questionnaire. We found that males prefer to use aggressive and self-enhancing humour, whereas females have more empathy; the perspective-taking and empathic concern are positively correlated to positive humour styles but are negatively correlated to negative humour styles. The perspective-taking and empathic concern serve to mediate the relation between gender and humour styles. In particular, empathic concern is the mediator of gender and aggressive humour, and perspective-taking is the mediator of gender and the other three humour styles. Aggressive humour is highly related to one's ability to receive the suffering of others, whereas using the three humour styles is related to whether one can perceive or identify with another's viewpoint. The present study helps us to understand why males prefer unfriendly humour.

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1. Introduction

Humour can soften the relationship between two people and is helpful in establishing and maintaining social contact (Zand, Spreen, and Lavalle, 1999). Humour brings happiness; however, hostile humour occasionally presents a tense situation (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, and Weir, 2003). Research has shown that in social contact, males tend more often to use aggressive humour compared to females (Yip & Martin, 2006) and that there is a gender difference in the use of humour. In addition to the gender factor, will there be other reasons that might influence a person's humour style? Among the many candidates, the use of empathy can effectively predict the aggressive behaviour of people (Gini, Albiero, Benelli, and Altoe, 2007); individuals with more empathy have demonstrated to be less inclined to attack others. Hence, we would understand more regarding the individual difference of humour use if empathy is a mediator of humour styles and genders. To address this issue, the present study investigates the mediating role of empathy in the humour process and the humour styles between males and females.

2. Gender difference in the use of humour

Humour plays an important role in social contact because it brings individuals closer together (Kuchner, 1991; Zand et al., 1999), it makes us feel happy, and it makes us avoid argument. People with a sense of humour tend to cope with conflict and embarrassment in social situations. On the one hand, a sense of humour is a positive characteristic that brings people together, e.g., a witty response makes you laugh; on the other hand, a sense of humour is sometimes aggressive, e.g., it is so mean that it irritates others (Martin et al., 2003).

In summary, humour has various functions (Martin, 2003), and the methods for evaluating humour are, thus, multiple (Thorson and Powell, 1993). In previous research, the tool for measuring a sense of humour could not discriminate the humorous expression toward oneself or toward others and could not differentiate between the friendly and unfriendly humour as well (Martin, 2007; Martin and Lefcourt, 1984; Svebak, 1974; Thorson and Powell, 1993). In 2003, Martin et al. first proposed the four humour styles, which classified humour styles along the dimensions of "toward oneself or toward others" and "kind-hearted or malicious," so that we have the styles of affiliative humour, self-enhancing humour, aggressive humour, and self-defeating humour. The former two are positive styles, and the latter two are negative humour styles. Subsequently, they developed the "humor styles questionnaire" to measure the potentially kind-hearted humour and the potentially malicious humour styles. This questionnaire aims to

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understand one's humour styles in ordinary life, especially the coping of social contact and life pressure.

Using the humour styles questionnaire (Martin et al., 2003), we understood how different the humour styles are between genders. Using 1195 undergraduates as a sample, the results showed that males have a stronger tendency than females to use all types of humour styles. Yip and Martin (2006) also recruited an undergraduate sample but found that males only preferred an aggressive humour style; Kazarian and Martin (2006) demonstrated that male adults usually used aggressive humour and self-defeating humour. In Asia, using the Chinese sample, Chan et al. (2009) found that males preferred unfriendly humour styles but females preferred affiliative humour style to improve interpersonal relationships. However, Martin et al. thought additional discussion is warranted to determine whether the gender difference in humour styles was a result of nature or education.

3. Likelihood of empathy in a mediating role

Empathy is defined as acquiring knowledge and sensitivity regarding how others feel because of understanding their situation (Eisenberg, 2000). Using the factor analysis, Davis (1983) defined empathy using four dimensions of interpersonal interaction tendency in cognition and disposition as follows: (1) perspective taking, the tendency of truly taking or comprehending others' psychological perspectives; (2) fantasy, how I would feel or act if I played the role in fictions, movies, and games; (3) empathic concern, the tendency of providing care to others when they are in trouble; and (4) personal distress, having temporal anxiety or discomfort in nervous interpersonal situations. Davis developed the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) accordingly, and the majority of the following research continued and developed based on his definition, especially the dimensions of perspective taking and empathic concern. For instance, Eisenberg claimed that empathy was the co-responding of cognition and emotion processes; the cognition process enabled individuals to identify the differences of the emotional status of oneself and others and the emotion process referred to the empathy and the feeling of suffering. Decety and Jackson (2006) indicated that the emotion process was the ability to share feelings with others, whereas the cognition process was the abilities of self-awareness and perspective-taking.

With respect to gender difference, females generally show empathy more than males, from the age of preschool on (Christov-Moore et al., 2014). With the expectation of gender role, showing concern and empathy is an important characteristic for females to fit the social role; females are expected to show more empathic behaviours than males in any situation. This statement is generally supported by the data of many empirical studies. In all types of self-report questionnaires, females are reported to demonstrate a greater tendency to be empathic than males in cognition and emotion aspects (Chaplin and Aldao, 2013; Rose and Rudolph, 2006).

Regarding the initial research on empathy and humour, Hampes (2001) found that humour and empathy were positively correlated by concluding from the results of The Empathic Concern subscale of the Empathy Questionnaire, the Coping Humor Scale (CHS), the Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale, and the Situational Humor Response Questionnaire (SHRQ). However, Hampes did not believe that humour might have a negative aspect in the beginning. Subsequently, he used the Empathy Questionnaire and Humour Styles Questionnaire in continuous studies. Hampes discovered that affiliative humour style and empathic concern had a significantly positive correlation, that self-enhancing humour style and perspective taking were positively relevant, that aggressive humour style, perspective taking, and empathic concern were negatively correlated; however, self-defeating humour style was not related to empathy (Hampes, 2010). In particular, regarding the cognition aspect or emotion aspect, empathy and aggressive humour style had a negative correlation. This finding was consistent with the claim by Mayberry and Espelage (2007). With regard to emotion aspect,

empathy makes people stop hurting others because they know how others feel. With regard to the cognition aspect, empathy allows individuals to observe from another person's viewpoint in social contact to decrease the bias by hostile attribution in the social information process.

To conclude, empathy is vital in interpersonal interacting. Moreover, research also has shown that empathy is strongly related to gender and humour styles. Hence, empathy is a potential mediator to the gender difference in the use of humour.

4. The present study

Previous studies have demonstrated gender difference in humour styles using (Chan et al., 2009; Kazarian and Martin, 2006; Martin et al., 2003; Yip & Martin, 2006). To discuss the potential factors for gender difference because of nature or education, the empirical support is still lacking. If we can identify the influential factor of humour styles and genders, the psychological process might be clear to us. Empathy is one key index to psychological health (Hobson, 2007; Lee, 2007); empathy, gender, and humour styles are also obviously relevant (Christov-Moore et al., 2014; Hampes, 2010). In previous research on humour styles, the focus was for the most part on other psychological traits, such as self-esteem, subjective well-being, and bullying (Dyck and Holtzman, 2013; Schermer et al., 2015; Stieger, Formann, and Burger, 2011); however, the studies regarding the specific process were few. One study focussed on empathy as a mediator to different psychological traits (Lee, 2009). Hence, the present study aims to investigate the mediator of empathy between gender and humour styles and hope that we could learn more concerning gender difference in the use of humour.

Concluding from the aforementioned reviews, we already know that males prefer the aggressive humour style in every type of sample. For the remaining three humour styles, the findings were inconsistent. Moreover, the gender difference in empathy is across ages; females generally exhibit more empathy than males in the cognition and emotion aspects. Empathy and humour styles are significantly relevant; the empathic concern and perspective taking are positively correlated to the affiliative humour style and self-enhancing humour style but are negatively correlated to the aggressive humour style, which shows that the aggressive humour style tends to be predictable by its cognition and emotion aspects. Hence, the present study compares the humour styles and the cognition and emotion aspects of empathy by genders and subsequently identifies the correlation of empathy and humour styles for the next stage. We investigate the mediating role of empathy in the relationship of gender and humour styles using the hierarchy regression analysis, Sobel Test, and the Bootstrapping Method; furthermore we assume that empathy mediates the tendency of using aggressive humour style between different genders. (See Fig. 1.)

5. Method

5.1. Participants

A total of 431 junior high school students in Taiwan (of whom 195 were male) were recruited to participate in the study. The students ranged in age between 13 and 14 years old; the average age in the sample was 13.32 (SD = 0.47) years. The participants were invited by their teachers, and each of them received a set of stationery after completing the experiment. All the participants agreed to proceed the research after well informed and completing the informed consent form.

5.2. Materials and procedure

The Humour Styles Questionnaire (Chan, Chen, Cho, and Martin, 2011) contains the following four styles: affiliative humour, self-enhancing humour, aggressive humour, and self-defeating humour. Every style is measured using 8 items. The total questionnaire comprises 32 items. The participant rates each item using a 7-point scale;

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