



Humor styles impact the relationship between symptoms of social anxiety and depression

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ABSTRACT

Recent research suggests that examining humor styles may contribute to our understanding of clinical problems, such as risk and resiliency. The goal of the current study was to examine whether humor styles moderate the association between social anxiety and depressive symptoms in an unselected sample. Three-hundred and six participants (66% female) at a large Southern US university completed self-report measures of humor styles and symptoms of social anxiety and depression. Regression analyses suggested that affiliative and self-defeating humor styles individually moderated the relationship between social anxiety and depressive symptoms. Clinical implications regarding the monitoring of humor use as a means of understanding the maintenance of depressive symptoms among socially anxious individuals are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The high comorbidity of anxiety and mood pathology is a persistent problem in the classification and treatment of mental health disorders (Mineka, Watson, & Clark, 1998). Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) and Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) are among the most commonly comorbid of these conditions (Ohayon & Schatzberg, 2010). This comorbidity is highly concerning as it has been linked to diminished quality of life (Wong, Sarver, & Beidel, 2012), greater symptom severity (Ledley et al., 2005), stress reactivity (Yoon & Joormann, 2012), increased risk for suicidal ideation and attempts (Sareen et al., 2005), and a distinct pattern of cognitive biases (LeMoult & Joormann, 2012). Additionally, comorbidity of SAD and MDD is associated with reduced treatment efficacy (Ledley et al., 2005).

Research suggests that SAD develops before MDD in the majority (70–91%) of comorbid cases (Ohayon & Schatzberg, 2010). This sequential comorbidity has prompted researchers to investigate mediators to determine whether the symptoms of social anxiety and their effects convey risk for depressive symptoms (e.g., Stein et al., 2001). Additionally, research examining moderators may identify which socially anxious individuals are at greatest and least

risk for depression. Numerous potential mediators of the association between social anxiety and depressive symptoms have been examined to better understand the comorbidity between these disorders. Potential mediators include avoidance of emotional expression (Grant, Beck, Farrow, & Davila, 2007), brooding (Grant et al., under review), interpersonal chronic life stress (Uliaszek et al., 2010), and quality of life (Ohayon & Schatzberg, 2010). However, few studies have investigated potential moderators of the relationship between SAD and MDD (e.g., Wong et al., 2012). Continued research regarding specific moderators of this relationship may identify which socially anxious individuals are at greatest risk for developing depressive symptoms and the host of negative outcomes associated with comorbidity. Given that both SAD and MDD are associated with similar interpersonal dysfunctions such as loneliness and social isolation (Alden & Phillips, 1990), using an interpersonal lens to investigate potential moderators of the relationship between these two pathologies may be fruitful.

Over the last decade, the investigation of interpersonal processes in SAD (e.g., Alden & Taylor, 2004, 2010) has increased our understanding of this condition. At their core, interpersonal theories propose that habitual social behaviors and relational schemas develop through social interactions (Alden & Taylor, 2010). The development of maladaptive interpersonal behavior patterns is thought to be characteristic of SAD and to play an important role in the origin and maintenance of symptoms (Alden & Taylor, 2004). More specifically, socially anxious individuals employ interpersonal strategies to avoid genuine self-disclosure in an effort to

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decrease the chance of negative evaluation (Alden & Taylor, 2010). Such behaviors may lead to social isolation, loneliness and/or negative interpersonal events, all of which are risk factors for depressive symptoms (Cacioppo, Hughes, Waite, Hawkley, & Thisted, 2006; Judah et al., 2013; Kaplan, Roberts, Camacho, & Coyne, 1987; Mazure, 1998). Thus, interpersonal processes represent particularly promising candidates for research on moderators of SAD/MDD comorbidity.

Humor style is one potential, yet unexplored, interpersonal behavior pattern that could provide a better understanding of the relationship between social anxiety and depression. Research has indicated that one's natural use of humor may influence both positive and negative indicators of psychological adjustment including symptoms of depression and anxiety (see Martin, 2007 for a review; Fitts, Seby, & Zlokovich, 2009; Tucker et al., 2013). Martin and colleagues (2003) describe four prominent humor styles – two positive and two negative. *Affiliative humor* is defined as humor used to strengthen social bonds and ease interpersonal tensions. The other positive humor style, *self-enhancing humor*, is the maintaining of a humorous outlook on life in the face of adversity, stress, and negative life events. *Aggressive humor* is characterized as being a negative style of humor which entails disparaging others in order to bolster the self. The final humor style outlined by Martin and colleagues (2003) is *self-defeating humor*, which is defined as disparaging oneself in order to amuse others and be looked upon in a positive light.

These four humor styles have been investigated in relationship to depression as well as variables closely associated with social anxiety. For example, research has demonstrated a negative association between affiliative humor style and vulnerability for depression, depressive symptoms, symptoms of anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Frewen, Brinker, Martin, & Dozois, 2008; Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003; Tucker et al., 2013). This humor style is related to positive interpersonal variables such as social support, interpersonal competence, and intimacy (Martin, 2007). Affiliative humor style may also be protective against interpersonal predictors of depression and suicide such as loneliness, shyness, thwarted belongingness, and perceived burdensomeness (Hampes, 2005, 2006; Fitts et al., 2009; Tucker et al., 2013). It may be that those who are experiencing symptoms of social anxiety are less likely to also feel depressed if they naturally use a humor style that helps them reach out and receive support from others.

Similar to affiliative humor, self-enhancing humor has been related to decreased depression, interpersonal predictors of suicide, suicidal ideation, and symptoms of anxiety (Martin et al., 2003; Tucker et al., 2013). Research has also indicated that this humor style is protective against interpersonal dysfunction such as loneliness and low self-esteem (Fitts et al., 2009; Hampes, 2005; Martin et al., 2003). It could be hypothesized that a humorous outlook on life may buffer against feelings of depression by reducing concerns about social rejection in the socially anxious.

Although aggressive humor has not been linked to increased symptoms of depression or anxiety (Martin et al., 2003), this humor style may have a strong influence on interpersonal variables associated with social anxiety. Those who naturally use aggressive humor report less relationship satisfaction and interpersonal competence (Yip & Martin, 2006). Similarly, research has demonstrated that an aggressive humor style is related to extreme feelings of social disconnectedness, lack of reciprocated caring, and perceptions that one is a burden on close others (Tucker et al., 2013). Recent research has noted a sub-type of SAD characterized by aggressive and impulsive behavior (Kashdan & McKnight, 2010; Kashdan, McKnight, Richey, & Hofmann 2009). Such individuals may adopt a more aggressive humor style, which may be jarring to others and result in social exclusion. Thus, this type of humor and the resulting exclusion may make these socially anxious individuals feel unwanted by others and thereby increase depressive symptoms.

The self-defeating humor style appears to be particularly pernicious, as it relates to increased susceptibility for depression, depressive symptoms, feelings of anxiety, and neuroticism (Frewen et al., 2008; Martin et al., 2003). Research also demonstrates that this humor style moderates the relationship between interpersonal predictors of suicide and suicidal thinking (Tucker et al., 2013). Increased levels of shyness and loneliness, and decreased self-esteem, and social intimacy have also been related to increased self-defeating humor (Fitts et al., 2009; Martin, 2007). Although this humor style may be motivated by a desire to facilitate social bonds, it may actually alienate oneself from others, resulting in feelings of loneliness and depression. This hypothesis is in line with interpersonal models of SAD, which posit that socially anxious individuals desire close relationships, but sabotage them with maladaptive behaviors prompted by this concern (Alden & Taylor, 2010). Thus self-defeating humor style may be particularly important to understanding the relationship between social anxiety and depression.

As humor styles have been related to depression and common interpersonal correlates of social anxiety, the investigation of humor styles and their potential moderating effect on the relationship between symptoms of social anxiety and depression is timely. To our knowledge, the current study is the first to explicitly investigate the relationship between humor styles and symptoms of social anxiety. This study is also novel because it investigates how particular humor styles may strengthen or weaken the relationship between social anxiety and depressive symptoms. This investigation is particularly important for expanding our knowledge of which socially anxious individuals are likely to develop depressive symptoms. It was hypothesized that affiliative and self-enhancing humor styles would be negatively associated with self-reported social anxiety symptoms. Conversely, it was posited that aggressive and self-defeating humor styles would be positively associated with social anxiety symptoms.

It was also hypothesized that affiliative and self-enhancing humor style would moderate the relationship between social anxiety and depressive symptoms such that individuals high in these positive humor styles would be buffered against the association between social anxiety and depression. Further, it was hypothesized that aggressive and self-defeating humor would also moderate the association between social anxiety and depression such that the negative humor styles would increase the strength of their relationship.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants in this study were 306 (103 Male, 203 Female) students from a large Southern U.S. university. Participants' age ranged from 18 to 46, with a mean age of 19.64. Participants self-identified as Caucasian ($n = 250$, 81.7%), Native American ($n = 20$, 6.5%), African American/Black ($n = 13$, 4.2%), Asian/Asian American ($n = 10$, 3.3%), Hispanic/Latino(a) ($n = 7$, 2.3%), Biracial ($n = 5$, 1.6%), and Other ($n = 1$, 0.3%). All participants were recruited through an online research protocol and received course credit in a psychology course that they were currently enrolled in as compensation. Study measures were administered online through web-based survey software. This study was conducted in compliance with the university Institutional Review Board.

2.2. Measures

Each participant completed the following measures:

2.2.1. Demographics questionnaire

Participants completed a measure of age, sex, and ethnicity.

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