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Humor styles, self-efficacy and prosocial tendencies in middle adolescents

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Abstract

This study explored humor styles, prosocial tendencies, and empathic/social self-efficacy in 302 Italian middle adolescents. We used Humor Styles Questionnaire (Penzo et al., 2011), Empathic and Social Self-efficacy Scales (Caprara et al., 2001), and Prosocial Tendencies Measure (Carlo & Randall, 2002). Results: affiliative and self-enhancing humor positively correlated with empathic/social self-efficacy, while self-defeating humor negatively correlated with social self-efficacy. Helping behavior in emotionally critical and dire situations positively correlated with empathic/social self-efficacy and, only for boys, with affiliative humor. Moreover, public and anonymous prosocial tendencies negatively correlated with affiliative humor. Differences for sex and age emerged.

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1. Introduction

Humor is a many-sided phenomenon generally referred to actions or stories perceived as funny and generating laughs or smiles, linked to cognitive ability that permits to produce or understand jokes or witticism (Feingold & Mazzella, 1993) and that could be considered a strategy that favors personal well-being and positive social interactions (Penzo, Giannetto, Stefanile, & Sirigatti, 2011; Zhao, Kong, & Wang, 2012).

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Martin and his colleagues (2003) distinguished four humor styles connected to positive or negative ways in which humor was typically used in everyday life. According to this model, positive styles were functional to reach personal well-being (self-enhancing style) and facilitate social relations (affiliative style) while negative styles were considered potentially detrimental for oneself (self-defeating style) or other people (aggressive style). Affiliative humor was linked to the tendency to tell jokes, humorous stories, and witticisms in order to amuse the others and favour interpersonal relationships; self-enhancing humor was referred to the use of humor as a coping strategy and to the tendency to find a humorous point of view in stressing situations; aggressive humor was linked to the inclination to use humor to improve one's own personal image damaging the others through sarcasm and teasing; self-defeating humor was referred to amuse the others at one's own expense, showing ridiculous behaviors or telling funny stories about oneself. Scholars underlined positive relationships between affiliative and self-enhancing humor and self-esteem, optimism, well-being and social intimacy (Martin et al., 2003; Erickson & Feldstein, 2006; Penzo et al., 2011; Leist & Muller, 2013). In addition, negative correlations between self-enhancing humor and depression symptoms and positive correlations between self-defeating humor and depression symptoms were found (Dozois, Martin & Bieling, 2009). Moreover, in the analysis of relationships among humor, emotional intelligence and social competence, Yip & Martin (2006) pointed out negative relationships between aggressive and self-defeating humor and the ability to perceive emotions and, on the contrary, positive relationships between affiliative and self-enhancing humor and social competence.

Additionally, researchers pointed out significant differences for sex and age in the inclination to use the four humor styles. In detail, Martin et al. (2003) noticed that male undergraduate students scored higher than female students in all humor styles, especially in aggressive humor. Other researches carried out with university students (Yip & Martin, 2006) and adolescents (Penzo et al., 2011) confirmed that males expressed more than females the inclination to use aggressive humor without significant differences for the other humor styles.

Little evidences in international research were found in regard to the relationships among the four humor styles, perceived empathic and social self-efficacy, and prosocial tendencies.

Perceived self-efficacy concerns beliefs about the individual abilities to structure and execute actions to organize and control social and personal situations (Bandura, 1986), through consciousness of personal limits and possibilities (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy beliefs are referred to specific domains of the individual's psychological and social functioning; in detail, the perceived empathic self-efficacy (see Caprara, 2001) consists of beliefs about one's personal ability to understand feelings and needs of the others, while the social self-efficacy regards the beliefs about the individual ability to play an active role in relationships with other people.

The exploration of prosocial tendencies, originally developed by Carlo & Randall (2002), is linked to the inclination to help the others in various social and psychological conditions (anonymous, public, emotional, compliant, dire, and altruistic behavior). In a sample of Italian adolescents, De Caroli & Sagone (in press) identified a three-factorial structure of prosocial tendencies: 1) helping behavior in emotionally critical and dire situations, regarding the inclination to help the others under emotionally evocative, emergency or crisis situations; 2) public prosocial behavior, concerning behaviors directed to benefit other people in the presence of the others; 3) anonymous prosocial behavior, defined as inclination to help the others without other people's knowledge. De Caroli & Sagone (in press) found significant relationships between empathic, interpersonal communication and problem solving self-efficacy and helping behavior in emotionally critical and dire situations.

2. Methodology

2.1. Purpose of study

The main purpose of this research was to explore the correlations between the four humor styles, perceived empathic and social self-efficacy, and the prosocial tendencies. In addition, sex and age differences in the analyzed dimensions were studied.

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