



Do individuals with autism lack a sense of humor? A study of humor comprehension, appreciation, and styles among high school students with autism



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ABSTRACT

Humor helps to build interpersonal bonds and allows individuals to feel closer. Previous research has generally claimed that individuals with autism have difficulty with interpersonal communication and social contacts, but there has been no such consensus regarding the sense of humor among individuals with autism. To address this issue, the present study aimed to compare the comprehension of, appreciation for, and preferred styles of humor between students with and without autism. The samples consisted of 177 high school students with autism and 177 control high school students. Every participant was within the normal range of intelligence. The gender ratio and age ratio of the two groups were maintained through pairwise sampling. The research tools were a questionnaire regarding the comprehension of and appreciation for nonsense and incongruity-resolution jokes, and the Humor Styles Questionnaire. The results show that the students with autism did not comprehend the nonsense jokes and incongruity-resolution jokes as well as the control students did, but they felt greater enjoyment when reading nonsense jokes. The students with autism preferred the nonsense jokes which is featured of less logical reasoning and using homophones for double-meaning. The tendencies toward affiliative humor, self-enhancing humor, and self-defeating humor among the students with autism were not as strong as those among the control students. Only the tendency toward aggressive humor was equal between two groups, showing that the students with autism still have sense of humor but tend to use hostile humor style. It is suggested to investigate the tendency of hostile humor in people with autism, and to provide them with affiliative humor to break the interpersonal stalemate experienced by individuals with autism.

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1. Introduction

Humor plays a key role in social exchanges, as it can serve as an interpersonal buffer and enliven interactions (Zand, Spreen, & Lavalle, 1999). However, individuals with autism generally experience barriers to communication and social

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connections (APA, 2013). Consequently, they are thought to be unable to form strong relationship bonds. It has been proposed that these interpersonal challenges could benefit from the charm provided by humor. However, it is not clear how high school students with autism interpret and handle humor. In previous studies, there has been little agreement about the ways in which individuals with autism comprehend and employ humor due the differences in the stimuli employed in the studies, and studying humor in autistic individuals is complicated by the fact that high school subjects are neither children nor adults (James & Tager-Flusberg, 1994; Reddy, Williams, & Vaughan, 2002; Werth, Perkins, & Boucher, 2001). During adolescence, teenagers with autism spend more time in school with their peers, where interpersonal relationships tend to be predominant. Therefore, the present study compared the differences in humor comprehension, humor appreciation and humor utilization of verbal jokes between students with and without autism to examine how individuals with autism experience humor.

1.1. *Humor in life*

Humor helps individuals feel connected and helps relieve pressure and release anger (Kuchner, 1991). Humor perception and presentation can be studied using the constructs of humor appreciation and humor style (Chan, Chou, Chen, & Liang, 2012; Chan et al., 2013; Martin, 2000; Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003). The former is defined as an individual's interpretation of the content of humor, and thus amusement, while the latter is defined as the tendency to adopt a particular style of humor.

Humor appreciation is the ability of individual to sense the funniness of information and recognize it as being humorous (Ruch & Hehl, 1998). Wyer & Collins (1992) proposed the comprehension–elaboration theory of humor, which states that individuals reinterpret the contents of jokes and resolve them after perceiving an incongruity, an action requiring two processes: comprehension and elaboration. Using textual jokes as experimental material, Chan et al. (2013) discriminated between these two processes using an fMRI technique and defined these two processes as the cognition and emotion of the humor. Comprehension is related to the cognition of humor, while appreciation is related to the emotion of humor.

Ruch (1992) categorized humor appreciation materials into three types: incongruity-resolution humor, nonsense humor, and sexual humor. Incongruity-resolution humor is characterized by an incongruity caused by a punch line that must be resolved by logically thinking over the content of the joke. Nonsense humor occurs when the surprising and incongruous elements of a joke cannot be fully resolved even after reflecting over the parts of the joke. Sexual humor is differentiated from the other types by its sexual content. According to these definitions, both incongruity-resolution humor and nonsense humor are amusing to the audience. The main difference between these two types of jokes is the logic of the content, which leads to different strategies of reasoning and the resolution of jokes. Sexual humor is specific in its content, but does not differ from the other types of humor in terms of structure. Thus, in the present study, only incongruity-resolution humor and nonsense humor were investigated to examine the differences among individuals in humor comprehension and humor appreciation of various types of jokes.

Humor style is defined as the expression of a person's sense of humor (Chan, Chen, Cho, & Martin, 2011). Most researchers have been unable to measure the positive and negative expression of humor (Martin, 2007; Martin & Lefcourt, 1984; Svebak, 1974; Thorson & Powell, 1993). Martin et al. (2003) was the first to suggest the existence of two dimensions of sense of humor: "toward oneself or toward others" and "kind-hearted or malicious". These two dimensions yield four types of humor: affiliative humor, self-enhancing humor, aggressive humor, and self-defeating humor. The former two are positive humor styles, whereas the latter two are negative humor styles. The Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ) was developed to discriminate kind-hearted and malicious humor styles (Martin et al., 2003). The focus of the questionnaire is the measurement of humor styles that spontaneously emerge in real life, especially those styles that are associated with coping with social interactions and pressures.

1.2. *How does autism influence the understanding and use of humor?*

It is generally accepted that individuals with autism tend to focus on details and do not "see the forest for the trees" – i.e., they tend to ignore the context of information. This tendency makes it difficult to understand jokes (Lyons & Fitzgerald, 2004; Samson & Hegenloh, 2010; Samson, Huber, & Ruch, 2013). Corresponding results from previous studies have shown that individuals with autism also have difficulty comprehending humorous content (Emerich, Creaghead, Grether, Murray, & Grasha, 2003; Ricks & Wing, 1975; Samson & Hegenloh, 2010; Van Bourgondien & Mesibov, 1987). The Theory of Weak Central Coherence attempts to explain why individuals with autism experience deficits in cognitive ability, social interaction, and language (Frith, 1989). It is generally accepted that human information processing uses central and peripheral routes. The central route is responsible for integrating message streams into a complete mental picture. Without the central route, the data perceived by the human brain are just unconnected pieces of information. Individuals with autism have difficulty determining the meaning of an entire message stream due to deficits in central coherence abilities. Therefore, integrating the message at different levels and categories is challenging for individuals with autism. Failures in the use of context for interpretation, due to impaired language abilities, can result in great difficulties in understanding the implications of a message. An over-focus on partial data causes individuals with autism to miss the context of information and reflects relatively weak integration abilities. Thus, the comprehension of verbal jokes is more difficult than pictorial jokes in individuals with autism because the former involve more verbal information (Emerich et al., 2003). How an individual with autism understands verbal jokes is an important topic, as verbal communication is commonly used in social interactions.

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