Putting a spotlight on daily humor behaviors: Dimensionality and relationships with personality, subjective well-being, and humor styles

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ABSTRACT

Although psychological humor research has expanded in the last decades, the humor behaviors that people show in their everyday lives are still poorly understood. To fill this gap, this diary study explores the dimensionality of 45 daily humor behaviors and their relationships with the Big Five personality traits and subjective well-being. Furthermore, the humor behaviors were utilized to investigate the criterion validity of the Humor Styles Questionnaire. A hierarchical factor analysis of the humor behaviors ($N = 123$) revealed seven dimensions: Cheerful, witty, deriding, amused, sarcastic, self-directed, and canned. These humor behavior dimensions correlated with emotional stability, extraversion, lower agreeableness, and culture/openness. Also cheerful, amused, and self-directed humor behaviors correlated positively with subjective well-being, even when personality and the humor styles were controlled for. The criterion correlations of the humor styles to their constituting humor behaviors were medium to large for affiliative and self-enhancing, and small to medium for aggressive and self-defeating. Overall, investigating humor behaviors seems a promising venue for future research and applications of individual differences in humor.

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1. Introduction

Individual differences in humor can be measured with various approaches, with self-report questionnaires and tests being most prevalent. By contrast, we know little about the actual humor behaviors that people show in their day-to-day lives. This research gap is important to be filled, however, as individual differences in humor need to have everyday behavioral consequences to be relevant for people's lives (as Furr, 2009, argued for personality psychology in general). For example, if someone endorses an aggressive humor style, one would expect this person to show more corresponding behaviors (like laughing at, making fun of, and teasing others) on a daily basis than a person scoring lower in this humor style. Understanding individual differences in daily humor behaviors and their relationship to personality and well-being is vital for two reasons: First, it allows disentangling the role of humor and additional elements that are often present in trait-based humor questionnaires (e.g., situations, evaluations, attitudes, functions, motives) and thereby allows a more direct test of the role that humor itself plays in personality and SWB. Second, it can help to develop and improve humor-based interventions and trainings by highlighting the humor behaviors that should best be practiced (or maybe decreased) to potentially enhance SWB.

Thus the present paper uses a longitudinal daily diary design (five consecutive days) to explore the dimensionality of 45 different humor behaviors as well as their relationships to the Big Five personality traits and subjective well-being (SWB), which represents the hedonic side of well-being. Additionally, assessing humor behaviors allows testing the criterion validity of humor measures. This is exemplified with the Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ; Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003) by investigating to what extent the HSQ can predict the humor behaviors it entails.

1.1. Everyday humor behaviors

A frequently employed measure of individual differences in humor, especially everyday functions of humor related to psychosocial well-being, is the HSQ (Martin et al., 2003). It measures four trait-like humor styles (Martin et al., 2003): Affiliative (enhancing one's relationships with others while being benign to oneself), self-enhancing (enhancing oneself while being benign to others), aggressive (enhancing oneself while being detrimental to others), and self-defeating (enhancing one's relationships with others while being detrimental to oneself). The first two are considered to be adaptive to psychosocial well-being, while the two latter ones are considered to be potentially maladaptive.

Notably, two diary studies assessed everyday humor styles with adapted items from the HSQ in two specific contexts, namely work (Guenter, Schreurs, Van Emmerik, Gijsbers, & Van Iterson, 2013) and romantic relationships (Caird & Martin, 2014). However, these only partly measured actual humorous behaviors, as the HSQ items entail further elements that are neither related to humor nor to behavior (see Ruch & Heintz, 2013, for a more detailed discussion). Also the overlap of the

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HSQ with these diary assessments (i.e., criterion validity) was not tested.

As this is–to my knowledge–the first diary study assessing humor behaviors, it was aimed to explore a broad and varied, albeit not all-encompassing, sample of humor behaviors. The humor behaviors were comprehensively taken from the HSQ to allow testing its criterion validity. Two additional sources were included to add further humor behaviors that were not covered in the HSQ (e.g., relating to irony and satire or reflective and earthy conduct). The first were the ten styles of humorous conduct presented by Craik, Lampert, and Nelson (1996), which are aligned along five bipolar dimensions (socially warm vs. cold, reflective vs. boorish, competent vs. inept, earthy vs. restrained, and benign vs. mean-spirited). Second, Schmidt-Hidding (1963) proposed the eight comic styles of fun, (benevolent) humor, nonsense, wit, irony, satire, sarcasm, and cynicism. It is first of interest how many dimensions underlie the 45 different humor behaviors derived from these three sources using a factor-analytic approach, which can be interpreted as the minimum amount of dimensions needed to describe individual differences in everyday humor behaviors.

Research Question 1 (RQ1): How many dimensions underlie the 45 daily humor behaviors?

1.2. Humor, personality, and subjective well-being

Previous research has frequently studied the relationship between individual differences in humor and broad personality traits. The HSQ usually correlated with the Big Five personality traits in a small to large range (for a meta-analysis, see Mendiburo-Seguel, Páez, & Martínez-Sánchez, 2015). Thus some significant correlations might also emerge between personality and the daily humor behavior dimensions, indicating who tends to show which kinds of humor behaviors in their everyday lives.

RQ2: How do the humor behaviors relate to the Big Five personality traits?

Besides personality, research on humor and SWB has been very active throughout the last decades. Consistent relationships were found especially with the HSQ (e.g., Kuiper, 2014; Martin et al., 2003), supporting the notion that some humor styles might be more adaptive (affiliative and self-enhancing) and others more maladaptive (mainly self-defeating) in terms of SWB. Thus the question arises if the daily humor behaviors are also related to SWB and what the direction of these relationships is.

RQ3: How do the humor behaviors relate to subjective well-being?

Given that both personality (for an overview, see Stones, Worobetz, & Brink, 2011) and the HSQ relate to SWB, it is of interest to test if any relationship of the humor behaviors with SWB remains once personality and the HSQ are controlled for. If so, the frequencies with which people exhibit humor behaviors on a day-to-day basis would capture information relevant for SWB that goes beyond the broad personality dimensions and the specific humor styles. This would further highlight their relevance of considering humor behaviors in future research and applications of humor and SWB.

RQ4: Can the humor behaviors explain variance in subjective well-being over and above the Big Five personality traits and the four HSQ scales?

1.3. Criterion validity of the Humor Styles Questionnaire

Despite its popularity, the psychometric properties of the HSQ, specifically its validity, remain understudied. While the criterion validity of the HSQ in terms of psychosocial well-being received support in many studies (e.g., Kuiper, 2014; Martin et al., 2003), its criterion validity in terms of everyday humor behaviors is unknown. As all humor behaviors of the HSQ were entailed in the diary assessment, they lend themselves as external criteria against which the HSQ can be tested; that is, the scores of the HSQ scales should predict the humor behaviors entailed

in them. At least medium-sized, but no perfect overlaps are expected to support criterion validity, as the humor behaviors represent one of two central aspects entailed in the HSQ (humor and its specific functions/uses).

RQ5: To what extent can the four HSQ scales predict their everyday humor behaviors?

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Participants

Overall 123 German-speaking participants filled in at least three of the five daily diaries in time (i.e., on the same evening). The median age of the sample was 24.00 years ($M = 27.68$, $SD = 10.37$) ranging from 18 to 68 years (30.9% men, 69.1% women). Participants were primarily Swiss (65.9%) and German (25.2%). Most participants were well educated, with 47.2% being college/university students, 23.6% having passed tertiary education, 24.4% having A-levels, and 4.8% having <12 years of education.

Before and after the daily diary assessment, participants were invited to fill in several questionnaires (same questionnaires and same procedure for both Assessment 1 and Assessment 2). The sample of Assessment 1 was the same as for the daily diaries, and 107 participants (31.8% men, 68.2% women) completed Assessment 2. Their median age was 24.00 ($M = 27.93$, $SD = 10.95$) ranging from 18 to 68 years.

2.2. Humor behavior assessment

2.2.1. HSQ humor behaviors

The daily HSQ humor behaviors were created by rephrasing the 32 HSQ items. A humor behavior was defined as a single concrete behavior that involved humor and/or laughter, and that can be performed by the participants. These criteria resulted in an overlap of several behaviors across different humor styles; for example, the behavior "Said funny things" was described in the HSQ affiliative, aggressive, and self-defeating items. Also some HSQ items entailed more than one behavior, which was then measured with two or more humor behaviors (e.g., the item "I laugh and joke a lot with my friends" was turned into the behaviors "laughed" and "joked around").

However, four of the HSQ items could not be transformed into humor behaviors, as they did not fulfill the criteria: Two self-enhancing items were too abstract and one aggressive and one self-defeating item did not contain active behaviors that participants could perform. Overall, affiliative was represented with seven behaviors, self-enhancing with six, aggressive with nine, and self-defeating with seven (29 overall). As several behaviors were present in two or more HSQ items, 20 *different* humor behaviors were sufficient to cover the HSQ.

2.2.2. Other humor behaviors

Additionally, 14 humor behaviors were extracted, in a similar fashion as was done for the HSQ, from the five bipolar styles of humorous conduct (1–5 humor behaviors each), and 11 humor behaviors were derived from the eight comic styles (1–3 humor behaviors each). The focus was on selecting humor behaviors that were non-redundant and that supplemented the HSQ humor behaviors. All 45 humor behaviors are listed in Table S1 in the supplementary materials.

Participants indicated the frequency with which they showed these humor behaviors on the present day on a five-point scale. The answer options were pre-tested to capture realistic daily frequencies to allow for sufficient variance in the behaviors: 1 = *Not at all (0 times)*, 2 = *rarely (1–2 times)*, 3 = *sometimes (3–5 times)*, 4 = *often (6–10 times)*, and 5 = *very often (11 + times)*.