



Short Communication

Prejudice-relevant correlates of humor temperaments and humor styles

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ABSTRACT

Given the field's interest in humor-relevant individual differences in general, we explored the extent to which humor styles and temperament are correlated with individual difference predictors of prejudice. Participants ($n = 136$) completed the humor styles questionnaire, the state-trait cheerfulness inventory-(traits), and measures of social dominance orientation (SDO), right-wing authoritarianism (RWA), personal need for structure (PNS), and anti-Black prejudice. Contrary to preferences for positive humor use among participants generally (i.e., collapsing across individual differences), those higher in SDO or anti-Black prejudice reported increased use of *aggressive* humor. Those with prejudicial tendencies theoretically rooted in uncertainty avoidance and low openness (RWA, PNS), however, demonstrated no preference (or even some distaste) for socially-oriented humor use. Whereas SDO, RWA, and anti-Black prejudice were unrelated to possessing a "good sense of humor", PNS was associated with a poor sense of humor. Overall, distinct and theoretically meaningful relations between the prejudice-prone variables and humor-relevant individual differences emerged, with aggressive uses of humor endorsed only by prejudiced and dominance- (vs. security-) oriented persons, contrary to preferences for affiliative and self-regulatory humor styles among people generally.

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1. Introduction

In the humor domain, researchers have become increasingly interested in individual differences. In terms of humor temperament, a "good sense of humor" can be operationalized as higher scores on trait-level cheerfulness, non-seriousness (i.e., playfulness), and infrequent negative moods (Ruch & Köhler, 1998). Humor temperaments have been mapped out within a broader personality space. Cheerfulness is particularly associated with higher extraversion, openness, and agreeableness, and with lower neuroticism, whereas seriousness is most strongly associated with lower psychoticism and extraversion but higher conscientiousness, and bad mood is most strongly associated with low extraversion, agreeableness, and high neuroticism (Ruch & Köhler, 1998).

Martin and colleagues (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003; Vernon, Martin, Schermer, & Mackie, 2008) have recently advanced a theoretical position emphasizing individual differences in *humor styles* (or function). Positive uses include affiliation (bonding with others) and self-enhancement (self-regulation, coping), whereas negative uses include aggression (hostility, manipulation) and self-deprecation (ingratiation to others via self-criticism). Whereas positive humor styles tend to correlate positively with extraversion and openness (Martin et al., 2003; Vernon

et al., 2008) and with narcissism (Veselka, Schermer, Martin, & Vernon, 2010), negative styles correlate negatively with conscientiousness, agreeableness, and emotional stability (Martin et al., 2003; Vernon et al., 2008), and positively with subclinical psychopathy and Machiavellianism (Veselka et al., 2010).

Many of these personality-based correlates of humor styles and temperament are also related to prejudice. Negative intergroup attitudes are particularly predicted by low agreeableness and low openness (Sibley & Duckitt, 2008), and by higher narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism (Hodson, Hogg, & MacInnis, 2009). To the extent that humor styles reflect functional differences across individuals (Martin et al., 2003), might humor-relevant individual differences therefore covary meaningfully with prejudice and its correlates? Early on, Freud (1960) [1905] proposed that humor represents socially-sanctioned hostility toward others, functioning to release pent-up psychic energy. In the intergroup domain, joke-telling has been found to contribute to negative stereotypes (Maio, Olson, & Bush, 1997) and attitudes (Hobden & Olson, 1994; but see Maio et al., 1997). In a recent investigation, exposure to sexist humor among sexist men promoted discrimination against women through perceived norms facilitating these actions (Ford, Boxer, Armstrong, & Edel, 2008). With regard to humor temperament, might those with poorer senses of humor (characterized as being uncheerful, more serious, and in bad moods) exhibit negative orientations toward outgroups through cognitive rigidity or general ill-temperament? Although

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humor is clearly linked to prejudice, individual differences in this context are rarely considered.

In contrast, there exists a large body of research explaining prejudice from an individual difference perspective (for reviews see Altemeyer, 1996; Sibley & Duckitt, 2008). Contemporary researchers are particularly interested in right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) and social dominance orientation (SDO), two of the strongest individual difference predictors of prejudice. Those higher in RWA are submissive, conventional, and aggress against “violators” when sanctioned (Altemeyer, 1996), whereas those higher in SDO are dominance-oriented, believing in group inequality and hierarchy (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Although SDO is rooted in subclinical dark triad personalities (narcissism, psychopathy, Machiavellianism), RWA is rooted in low openness, with each predicting prejudice against outgroups through heightened perceptions of intergroup threat (Hodson et al., 2009). In contrast to these more “intergroup” constructs, personal need for structure (PNS; Neuberg & Newson, 1993) represents the desire for routine and simple organization in one’s personal life. Outgroups, by definition, are “different” and can interfere with desires for cognitive simplicity and routine. Negative intergroup biases such as stereotyping and prejudice are argued to originate, in part, from basic epistemic motivations for simplicity and the familiar.

1.1. Present investigation

The aim of the present paper is to explore how individual differences in humor styles and temperament relate to prejudice and established prejudice correlates. Participants overall were expected to endorse positive (affiliative, self-enhancing) over negative (aggression, self-defeating) humor styles (see Martin et al., 2003) (H1), and to report a good sense of humor (H2). However, distinct patterns were predicted as a function of the nature of specific prejudice-prone individual differences. SDOs are tough-minded (Sibley & Duckitt, 2008) and relatively higher in psychopathy and Machiavellianism (Hodson et al., 2009), variables associated with aggressive humor (Veselka et al., 2010). Tendencies characterized by *intergroup dominance* (SDO) were therefore expected to predict *aggressive* humor styles only (H3). For similar reasons, heightened anti-Black racism, characterizing a negative anti-outgroup orientation, was expected to predict aggressive humor use (H4). These constructs concern outgroup-oriented themes, notably dominance over outgroups and outgroup dislike (respectively), that emphasize opposition against “others” who are different from the ingroup. In contrast, intergroup orientations more concerned with *social control and security* (RWA) were not expected to correlate with humor aggression (H5); RWAs consider themselves relatively good (not mean) people (Altemeyer, 1996), with authoritarianism more related to low openness than “darker” personality factors (Hodson et al., 2009). Given the conventional

and prudish natures of authoritarians, increased RWA was also expected to be associated with a “poorer” sense of humor (H6). Those higher in PNS, being focused on need for structure in one’s personal life rather than being ideologically driven by intergroup or inter-personal concerns, were expected to disavow social humor styles (aggression, affiliation) (H7) and report poorer senses of humor (H8).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Undergraduates (49 men, 87 women) at a Canadian university participated for course credit. The majority self-identified as Canadian (97%), White/Caucasian (98%), and none as Black ($M_{age} = 19.42$, $SD = 2.19$, range = 18–31).

2.2. Materials

All scale anchors ranged from *strongly disagree* (or *do not agree at all*) to *strongly agree*. For potential scale ranges, see Table 1.

2.2.1. Humor styles questionnaire (HSQ)

The HSQ (Martin et al., 2003) consists of 32 items assessing personal humor functions. Subscales tapped: (a) *aggression* (e.g., “If I don’t like someone, I often use humor or teasing to put them down”; $\alpha = .67$); (b) *self-defeating* (e.g., “I will often get carried away in putting myself down if it makes my family or friends laugh”; $\alpha = .78$); (c) *affiliation* (e.g., “I enjoy making people laugh”; $\alpha = .83$); and *self-enhancing* (e.g., “My humorous outlook on life keeps me from getting overly upset or depressed about things”; $\alpha = .80$).

2.2.2. State-trait cheerfulness inventory (STCI-T)

The trait-version of the 30-item state-trait cheerfulness inventory (STCI-T; Ruch, Köhler, & van Thriel, 1996) assessed *cheerfulness* (e.g., “I am a cheerful person”; $\alpha = .85$), *seriousness* (e.g., “In most situations, I initially see the serious aspect”; $\alpha = .73$), and *bad mood* (e.g., “I often feel despondent”; $\alpha = .88$).

2.2.3. Social dominance orientation (SDO)

The 16-item SDO₆ scale (e.g., “It’s probably a good thing that certain groups are at the top and other groups are at the bottom”; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) assessed endorsement of intergroup hierarchies and group dominance ($\alpha = .91$).

2.2.4. Right-wing authoritarianism (RWA)

A shortened 12-item version of Altemeyer’s (1996) RWA scale assessed authoritarian tendencies rooted in adherence to conven-

Table 1
Relations between humor variables and prejudice-relevant individual differences.

	M	SD	Humor styles questionnaire (HSQ negative subscales)				Humor styles questionnaire (HSQ positive subscales)				State-trait cheerfulness inventory (STCI)					
			Aggressive		Self-defeating		Affiliative		Self-enhancing		Cheerful		Serious		Bad mood	
			r	β	r	β	r	β	r	β	r	β	r	β	r	β
SDO	2.34	1.03	.34***	.37**	.02	.09	-.03	.15	-.06	-.01	-.13	-.04	.06	-.05	.11	.10
RWA	2.88	.97	-.02	-.13	.02	.01	-.13	-.06	.00	.07	-.03	.10	.15	.04	-.01	-.15
PNS	.09	.91	-.18*	-.22*	.07	.05	-.26**	-.24**	-.11	-.10	-.18*	-.18*	.40***	.41***	.24**	.27**
MRS	.88	.62	.24**	.06	-.07	-.13	-.12	-.18	-.07	-.08	-.16	-.16	.08	.07	.09	.05
R ²				.18		.01		.09		.02		.06		.18		.08

Note. SDO = social dominance orientation (1–7); RWA = right-wing authoritarianism (1–7); PNS = personal need for structure (–3 to +3); MRS = modern racism (against Blacks) (0–4). $N = 136$. Standardized betas shown.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

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