



Do I amuse you? Asymmetric predictors for humor appreciation and humor production



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ABSTRACT

A “sense of humor” can be fractionated into appreciation (enjoying jokes), production fluency (making jokes), and production success (making funny jokes). There is scant research on how appreciation and production relate, and their relation to individual differences. Participants ($N = 159$) rated the humor of captioned cartoons and created captions for different cartoons. People who wrote funnier captions were less amused by the professionally-captioned cartoons. Production fluency, in contrast, was not related to appreciation. Personality predicted humor appreciation, but not production success. Demographics predicted production success, but not appreciation. Appreciation and production success appear to rely on separable mechanisms and motivations. Our results were also inconsistent with the idea that humor creators are motivated by dominance and humor appreciators by affiliation.

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1. Introduction

Humor has long been seen as a human quality of fundamental social importance, with the ancient Greeks dividing theatre into comedy and tragedy alone. Perhaps because humor is used to ease social interactions (Chapman, 1973), people who have a good ‘sense of humor’ are perceived to have more socially-desirable traits than those with less of a sense of humor (Cann & Calhoun, 2001). One way that funny people may make a good impression on others is by reducing social distance during interactions (Graham, 1995), perhaps conveying greater social warmth. Individuals who have a sense of humor may also gain health benefits, with humor acting as an important coping mechanism for life’s tribulations (Lefcourt, Davidson, Prkachin, & Mills, 1997). This can lead to decreased stress and improved performance in the workplace (Mesmer-Magnus, Glew, & Viswesvaran, 2012), and is also associated with better immune system functioning (Fry, 1992). In light of the importance of humor for our social interactions and personal wellbeing, the growing research in this area is an exciting and valuable enterprise.

A ‘sense of humor’ can be fractionated into at least two components: (1) understanding humor as intended by others, known as humor comprehension; and (2) creating humor that is understood and appreciated by others, known as humor production (Kohler &

Ruch, 1996). These aspects of humor can be further broken down, with humor comprehension being a prerequisite for humor appreciation—appreciation being the mirth response (laughter, smiling) or how funny a joke is perceived after it has been comprehended. Similarly, humor production also has various components, including at least two separate processes: (1) how many jokes are made, or production fluency; and (2) how funny these jokes are perceived by others, or what we term production success. In order to better understand what a global sense of humor entails, it is important to identify how different components of humor relate. Unfortunately, past empirical research into this question has led to a complex series of somewhat contradictory results.

In a study of school-aged children, Masten (1986) found that (1) humor comprehension and production success were positively associated, that (2) humor comprehension and humor appreciation were positively associated, but that (3) there was no relation between the success of humor production and humor appreciation. A different study also found that humor comprehension and production success were positively related, but employed a measure of success that was not entirely independent from comprehension, potentially confounding the issue (Feingold & Mazzella, 1993). A more recent examination of these questions incorporated a humor comprehension task uncontaminated by issues of production and found that the two were positively related, but this study relied upon a small sample of adults ($N = 18$; Kozbelt & Nishioka, 2010).

Although humor comprehension and production appear to be related, it is not currently clear whether humor appreciation also predicts production success or fluency. This is somewhat curious

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since the comprehension and appreciation of humor are themselves closely related (Goldstein, 1970; Kozbelt & Nishioka, 2010). One study found a positive correlation between humor appreciation and production success, but only when these constructs were measured using self-report; when appreciation and production success (and fluency) were measured behaviorally, there was no relationship between the two (Kohler & Ruch, 1996). In fact, the small number of other studies in this area have also failed to find an association between appreciation and production (Babad, 1974; Fabrizi & Pollio, 1987; Koppel & Sechrest, 1970), even when a relation was observed between humor appreciation and humor comprehension, and between comprehension and production success (Kozbelt & Nishioka, 2010).

In sum, there appear to be replicable positive correlations between humor appreciation and humor comprehension (Byrne, 1956; Goldstein, 1970; Kozbelt & Nishioka, 2010; Wierzbicki & Young, 1978), between humor comprehension and humor production (Attardo, 1994; Feingold & Mazzella, 1993; Kozbelt & Nishioka, 2010; Masten, 1986), but not between humor appreciation and humor production. Given that we often speak of people having a sense of humor in a broad sense, and that humor comprehension and production are related, one would imagine that humor appreciation and production should also be closely related.

The current lack of support for an association between the appreciation and production aspects of humor may be due to both methodological shortcomings of past work and to a lack of control over the type of humor assessed. Humor often depends upon context and there are many ways to be funny. Someone might excel at writing totally hilarious emails, but rarely crack a joke in a gathering. Some people enjoy physical comedy more than satire, and others still only enjoy humor that is disparaging or mean-spirited (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003). Most studies of humor have not controlled for these various types of humor within the same sample of participants, nor have they employed behavioral measures of humor, properly separating different aspects of production such as fluency and success, or relied upon appropriate sample sizes. Past studies have primarily been on children (e.g., Masten, 1986) or select populations like comedians (e.g., Greengross, Martin, & Miller, 2012; Siegler, 2004), and often employed small samples (e.g., Kozbelt & Nishioka, 2010). Just as importantly, past work has not typically matched the characteristics of the appreciation and production tasks. Because humor is often context-dependent, examining possible associations between the different aspects of humor should take place within a shared context. At the very least, controlling for the humor context should decrease error or noise in the data allowing for a better visualization of the relationship between appreciation and production. To date, no single study has addressed all of these important design issues, allowing for a proper test of how appreciation and production relate. Here we examine humor in a relatively large sample of the adult population, unselected for profession, controlling for the type of humor assessed across the appreciation and production tasks, and examining both production fluency and production success.

An additional strategy for exploring how these aspects of humor relate to one another, and better understanding their individual functions, is to examine how they each relate to a variety of other individual differences. In past work, for example, individuals high in trait empathy were also high in humor appreciation, rating jokes as more funny (especially those requiring mental inference; Samson, 2012). This finding highlights the role of properly interpreting the social context during humor appreciation and illustrates the importance of examining individual differences. The Big Five personality traits are also likely to be important factors to consider, since those higher in humor appreciation are perceived to be more extraverted and open to experience (Cann & Calhoun, 2001). A

good deal less is known about the individual differences associated with humor production, unfortunately. People higher in independently-measured creativity (Brodzinsky & Rubien, 1976) and verbal intelligence (Feingold & Mazzella, 1993) are more successful at humor production, but much remains to be discovered, especially with regards to differences in personality. A second aim of this study was to explore the individual differences associated with both appreciation and production in the hopes of illuminating any relation between these processes.

Although the positive associations between comprehension and appreciation, and between comprehension and production appear to support the idea that appreciation and production should be positively related, there are other possibilities. In fact, there are three possible predictions regarding the association between humor appreciation and humor production. First, appreciation and production may be positively related, in that funny people are more likely to find amusement in other people's humor. This pattern would fall most naturally out of previous theoretical positions on humor, as described above (Feingold, 1983). Second, there may be no relation between appreciation and production. This would indicate that enjoying humor and producing it are the products of distinct (and unrelated) cognitive and motivational processes, and that the lay concept of a unitary sense of humor is inaccurate. Although this lack of association has been previously reported, the necessary controls for stimulus and participant characteristics were absent, making these null results difficult to interpret. Lastly, humor appreciation and production may be negatively correlated. We would expect this result if the motivational pressures underlying humor production and appreciation are in opposition. Theoretically, one might tell jokes to demonstrate competence or dominance (see Masten, 1986), whereas appreciating jokes might signal affiliation and/or deference to others. Such a result might be reflected in differential associations between the personality dimensions and humor appreciation and production. It might also be the case that the different aspects of humor production, fluency and success, have different associations with humor appreciation.

The current study examines how humor appreciation and humor production relate in a relatively large sample of participants, controlling for the humor context, and with the same group of participants performing both the humor appreciation and production tasks. An additional aim of this study is to examine these two processes within a nomothetic network of trait personality and individual differences to better understand their nature and relationship.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were recruited from all over the world via an advertisement on the online service Amazon Mechanical Turk (<http://www.mTurk.com>). From an initial sample of 298 who completed the entire survey, a total of 118 participants were removed for the following reasons: reporting less than 10 years of English fluency ($N = 44$), having less than 10 years of education ($N = 32$), and those for whom there was evidence of inattentive responding¹ ($N = 42$). Of the remaining 180 participants, 21 were removed from the final analysis because they produced fewer than 6 valid captions across the cartoon set; valid captions were identified based on independent rater assessments of whether the captions were meaningful

¹ Defined as those who responded with either agreement or neither agreement nor disagreement with the statement, "Generally sleeps more than 3 h a week" based on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from disagreement to agreement. Those who responded with anything less than agreement (scores from 1 to 3) were removed.

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