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A native of Fairfield, Ill., I came to Murray State University with the intention of acquiring a bachelor's degree in psychology. As an undergraduate, I participated in Murray State's study abroad program, am a member of Psi Chi, and conducted several independent research projects. After graduating in 2005 with my B.A. in psychology, I have been accepted and plan to continue my education in Murray State's master's program in clinical psychology.

ABSTRACT

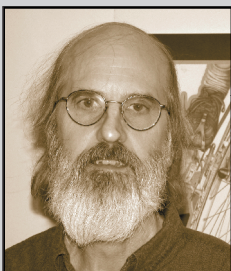
Test of a Social Developmental Model of the Use of Humor by College Students

A social developmental model of the use of humor was assessed. The Humor Styles Questionnaire provided scores on each of the dependent variables of frequency of use of affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive and self-defeating humor. Regression analyses assessed the relationships between each of the dependent variables and gender of the student, number of children in the student's family, and the student's birth order. Students also rated their primary male and female caregivers on the frequency of their use of humor. There were significant negative correlations between family size and the frequency of use of both affiliative and aggressive humor. There was a significant negative correlation between birth order and use of affiliative humor. Level of use of humor by the female caregiver had a significant positive correlation with the use of self-enhancing humor while level of use of humor by the primary male caregiver was not significantly associated with the frequency of use of any of the humor styles.

FACULTY MENTORS



Alysia D. Ritter is a professor of psychology who, during her 16 years at MSU, has taught general psychology, child development, perception, and research methods and design. She received her bachelor's degree from the University of New Orleans and her master's and doctorate degrees from University of Houston. Her research interests include sensations, perceptions, attitudes and beliefs pertaining to behavior. She actively encourages student interest and involvement in psychological research. The undergraduates she has mentored have published 16 articles and given 40 presentations at local and regional conferences.



Joel Royalty is a professor in MSU's Department of Psychology. His research interest is the multivariate analysis of behavior through the application of incremental partitioning of variance. Recent research includes the identification of pre-college variables associated with level of drug use in college students, the operation of a halo effect in student ratings of instructors, the salience of attitudes towards the invasion of Iraq on ratings of the overall job performance of President Bush, predictors of level of student satisfaction with service learning courses, and the analysis of type II error rates in published psychological research.

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A sense of humor is an important component of personality. Further, because individuals vary widely in terms of both the nature and extent of their senses of humor, it is an attribute that contributes significantly to individual differences. This contribution begins early in life. For example, Dews et al. (1996) found that children as young as 5 years old have the ability to comprehend humor in the form of irony; that is, a form of humor in which the intended meaning is different from the literal meaning of the words used. Children are also able to detect the difference in irony intended for humor and irony intended for meanness (Dews, et al.).

McGhee and Lloyd (1982) identified behaviors and temperaments of 60 preschool children that were associated with the development of a sense of humor. Social play, aggression and energy level were most highly correlated with the development of humor in the participants. Other significant predictors were the frequency of laughter and attention seeking.

Evidence of parental influence on the development of a sense of humor can be inferred from the results of research on parents' roles in the development of children's social competence. Because humor is an important aspect of social interaction, it would be expected to be influenced by the nature and extent of parental use of humor. Krantz, Webb and Andrews (1984) examined the role of parents in the development of social competence in children. The primary parental variables in this research were the extent of social contacts of parents with friends and their involvement in community activities. Social behavior and social cognitive abilities of the children were measured. Popularity, social acceptance, sensitivity, behavior and ratings of social competence comprised these measures. The researchers found a high correlation between the mother's social involvement and the child's social competence. However, there was not a significant correlation between the level of social involvement of fathers and the social competence of their children.

While the research literature on the development of social competence in children is consistent with the hypothesized role

of parents (or at least mothers) on the development of a sense of humor in children, it is not clear whether such a relationship would still be present when the children reached adulthood. After all, adult children may be assumed to have been increasingly influenced by peers, education and other influences outside the family environment. The present research was designed to assess the relationships between the "style" of humor exhibited by college students and their corresponding family, parental and demographic variables.

It was hypothesized that maternal use of humor would be a better predictor of college students' humor styles than paternal use of humor. Further, based on Rim's (1986) finding that family size is a factor related to the use of the sense of humor as a coping device, it was hypothesized that family size would be associated with humor style. Finally, the present research addressed the question of the relationship between humor style and gender.

Method

Ninety-six Murray State University students served as participants. Each participant completed both The Humor Styles Questionnaire (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larson, Gray and Weir, 2003) and a questionnaire designed to assess demographic, parental and family variables. The Humor Styles Questionnaire is composed of 32 questions and yields scores on each of the following subscales: affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive and self-defeating humor styles. Responses to each question were made on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from one (totally disagree) to seven (totally agree). Higher scores on each subscale are associated with increased use of the particular style of humor.

Examples of affiliative humor are joking around with other people and the ability to make other people laugh. Behaviors associated with self-enhancing humor include being amused by the absurdities of life, even when alone, and being able to cheer oneself up with humor. Aggressive humor would include teasing others about their mistakes and lack of concern regarding how other people might

react to a joke. An example of self-defeating humor is seeking acceptance from others by saying something funny about one's own mistakes, weaknesses or flaws.

In addition to obtaining the gender of each participant, the demographic questionnaire contained four questions designed to measure family influence on humor. The structure of the participant's family was assessed by measures of the number of children in the family and the participant's birth order. Two questions were designed to assess the use of humor by the participant's primary caregivers. Specifically, participants rated both their primary male and female caregivers on the variable of how often they displayed a sense of humor over the course of the participant's life.

Participants were given a maximum of one hour to complete the questionnaires and each was treated in accordance with "Ethical Principles Psychologist Code of Conduct" (American Psychological Association, 1992).

Results

With the exception of family size, measures on each variable were obtained for each of the 96 participants. Six participants did not provide information on family size and were excluded from all analyses. Of the resulting sample of 90 participants, 23.33 percent were males. Number of children in the families of the participants ranged from one to seven, with 88.89 percent of families having four or less children. Birth order also ranged from one to seven, with 93.33 percent of participants reporting a birth order of three or lower.

A one-way within subjects (repeated measures) analysis of variance found that there were significant differences in the frequency with which the participants used the four styles of humor, $F(3, 267) = 118.60, p < .0001$. A Tukey's HSD test was performed to determine the source of this effect and yielded the following results: affiliative humor ($M=46.36, SD=6.38$) was used significantly more frequently than self-enhancing ($M=39.33, SD=7.83$), aggressive ($M=29.06, SD=8.15$), and self-defeating ($M=29.87, SD=8.88$) humor. Self-enhancing humor was used significantly more frequently than either aggressive or self-defeating humor. The frequency of use of aggressive and self-defeating humor did not differ significantly.

Simple correlations were obtained to measure the relationships between each of the four humor style scores and the variables of

Table 1		
Pearson Correlations between Family Structure and Humor Styles		
	Family Size (n= 90)	Birth Order (n= 90)
Affiliative	-0.37**	-0.21*
Self Enhancing	-0.14	-0.11
Aggressive	-0.22*	-0.02
Self Defeating	-0.01	0.02
<i>Note. *p < .05, ** p < .0005</i>		

Table 2	
Point Biserial Correlations between Gender and Humor Styles	
	Gender (n= 90)
Affiliative	-0.02
Self-Enhancing	-0.01
Aggressive	-0.26*
Self-Defeating	-0.16
<i>Note. *p < .05, males=1, females=2 on variable of gender</i>	

Table 3		
Pearson Correlations between Level of Use of Humor by Primary Male and Female Caregivers and Humor Styles		
	Male Caregiver (n= 90)	Female Caregiver (n= 90)
Affiliative	0.14	0.20
Self Enhancing	0.13	0.31*
Aggressive	-0.11	-0.13
Self Defeating	-0.11	-0.11
<i>Note. *p < .005</i>		

family size and birth order (Table 1), gender (Table 2), and level of use of humor by primary male and female caregivers (Table 3). With regard to the association between family structure and humor styles, there were significant negative correlations between family

size and the frequency of use of both affiliative and aggressive humor by the participants. That is, as family size increased, the use of affiliative and aggressive humor styles tended to decrease. Family size was not significantly associated with the use of either self-enhancing or self-defeating humor.

There was a significant negative correlation between birth order and use of affiliative humor with earlier born children more likely to use affiliative humor. Birth order was not significantly associated with the likelihood of using self-enhancing, aggressive or self-defeating humor.

There was a significant point biserial correlation between gender and use of aggressive humor, with males more likely to use aggressive humor than females. There was no relationship between gender and the level of use of affiliative, self-enhancing or self-defeating humor.

Level of use of humor by female caregivers had a significant positive correlation with the use of self-enhancing humor but was not significantly related to the frequency of use of the other three humor styles. The level of use of humor by the primary male caregiver was not significantly associated with the frequency of use of any of the four humor styles. A one-way within subjects (repeated measures) analysis of variance found that the frequency of use of humor by the primary male and female caregivers did not differ significantly, $F(1, 89) = 1.61, p > .05$.

A final series of multiple regression analyses was performed to assess the proportion of variance in the frequency of use of each of the four humor styles that could be accounted for by the weighted linear combination of the five predictor variables (gender, family size, birth order, use of humor by the primary female caregiver, and use of humor by primary male caregiver). The five predictor variables accounted for 0.16 proportion of variance in use of affiliative humor, $F(5, 84) = 3.12, p < .05$. Of the five predictor variables, only family size accounted for a unique proportion of the variance in use of affiliative humor, $F(1, 84) = 7.88, p < .01$. That is, only family size accounted for a significant proportion of variance above and beyond that accounted for by the other four predictors.

The weighted linear combination of the five predictor variables accounted for .17 proportion of the variance in use of aggressive humor, $F(5, 84) = 3.40, p < .01$. Both family size, $F(1, 84) = 7.67, p < .05$, and gender, $F(1, 84) = 7.03, p < .01$ accounted for significant proportions of unique variance. The weighted linear combinations of the five predictor variables did not account for a significant proportion of the variance in the frequency of use of either self-enhancing or self-defeating humor.

Discussion

As described above, previous researchers have found a high correlation between the child's and the mother's, but not the father's, social involvement. The finding that the level of use of humor by female, but not male, caregivers had a significant positive correlation with the use of self-enhancing humor in their children is consistent with a social developmental model. Although the use of affiliative humor in college students was not significantly correlated with the level of use of humor by female caregivers, hypothesized early influences on the style and frequency of use of humor is consistent with the significant negative correlations between use of affiliative humor and both birth order and family size. Of course these two variables are not independent since higher birth order is possible only with larger families.

Several of the limitations of the present study suggest the next series of studies. First, the present study measured the frequency of the use of humor by primary caregivers but not the type of humor used. Second, family structure variables were limited to birth order and family size. Future research should include variables designed to measure the social structure of families and the degree of involvement with friends and peer groups.

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