

Spitefulness and humor styles



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ABSTRACT

The aim of the present study was to examine the association between spitefulness and humor styles. To examine this association, 539 participants completed self-report measures assessing their spitefulness, basic personality dimensions, and humor styles. Spitefulness was positively correlated with the injurious humor styles (i.e., aggressive humor and self-defeating humor) and negatively associated with the benign humor styles (i.e., affiliative humor and self-enhancing humor). Taken together, these findings show that spiteful individuals are more likely to belittle, degrade, and harm others and themselves by employing injurious humor styles. These findings extend our knowledge regarding the connections between personality traits and humor styles.

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1. Introduction

Spitefulness is often defined as the degree to which an individual is willing to incur a cost in order to inflict harm on another individual (e.g., Hamilton, 1970). An example of spitefulness would be someone who takes an especially long time to disembark an airplane after she feels rushed by an impatient passenger behind her. This intentional delay costs the woman a small bit of her own time but it inflicts harm on the impatient passenger. Behavioral economists and evolutionary biologists have studied spitefulness for a variety of reasons including the possible role that it may play in the emergence of cooperation (e.g., Rockenbach & Milinski, 2006). Despite the potential importance of spitefulness for understanding certain aspects of social behavior (e.g., cooperation, fairness), it has not been examined very closely by psychologists until recent years. One reason for the recent interest in spitefulness is that the motivations of spiteful individuals appear to be more complex than simply accruing immediate benefits and avoiding immediate costs because spiteful individuals are willing to incur costs (and forgo benefits) in order to inflict harm on others (see Marcus & Norris, 2016, for an extended discussion). Although the origins of spitefulness remain unclear, a variety of possible explanations for the persistence of spitefulness in the population have been offered such as inclusive fitness (Hamilton, 1970), reputational benefits for individuals engaging in spiteful acts (Kurzban, DeScioli, & O'Brien, 2007), and relative gains for spiteful individuals when the costs they incur are less than the harm they inflict on others (Jensen, 2010).

Individual differences in spitefulness have been found to be associated with a variety of aversive characteristics such as potentially pathological personality features (e.g., Marcus, Zeigler-Hill, Mercer, & Norris, 2014), low levels of guilt (Marcus et al., 2014), emotion regulation difficulties (Zeigler-Hill & Vonk, 2015), and difficulties understanding the mental states of others (Ewing, Zeigler-Hill, & Vonk, 2016). Overall, these findings show that individuals with high levels of spitefulness are more likely to engage in behaviors that are aggressive or antagonistic and appear to have relatively little concern for the consequences of their actions for other individuals. The emerging characterization of spiteful individuals – such as their relative lack of concern for others – led us to consider the possibility that spitefulness may be associated with the humor styles that individuals adopt. That is, the willingness of individuals with high levels of spitefulness to inflict harm on others – and incur costs to themselves – may be reflected in the types of humor that these individuals employ.

Freud (1905/1960) proposed that humor can be used as an unconscious way to express aggression. More recently, humor has been found to have both intrapersonal and interpersonal functions (see Martin, 2010 for a review). For example, individuals often use humor to comfort themselves (e.g., Carroll & Schmidt, 1992) or initiate social interactions (e.g., Yip & Martin, 2006). Despite humor having many positive consequences such as enhancing relationships (Allport, 1961) and decreasing negative emotional states (Goldstein, 1987), it is also important to note that there is a dark side to humor. In particular, the darker aspects of humor concern individuals inflicting harm on others (e.g., belittling an individual or a group) or themselves (e.g., diminishing one's own abilities; Baron, 1978). Overall, an individual with high levels of spitefulness may utilize the more harmful forms of humor in order to inflict costs on others. The present study examined the connections that

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spitefulness had with the positive and negative aspects of humor by utilizing the humor styles model that was developed by Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, and Weir (2003).

1.1. Humor styles

Martin et al. (2003) unified the distinct aspects of humor into a two-dimensional model. The first dimension concerns the fact that humor can take either a benign or an injurious form. The second dimension reflects the target of enhancement such that humor is believed to either enhance relationships with others or enhance the self. These two underlying humor dimensions combine to create four specific humor styles: *affiliative* humor (benign humor that enhances relationships with others), *self-enhancing* humor (benign humor that enhances the self), *aggressive* humor (injurious humor that enhances the self), and *self-defeating* humor (injurious humor that enhances relationships with others). This model is depicted in Fig. 1.

Affiliative humor refers to the use of humor that enhances and bolsters relationships as well as increases group cohesion without being harmful to oneself or others. For example, individuals may engage in humorous anecdotes in order to decrease tension. The self-enhancing humor style involves the use of humor as a coping resource in order to make an individual feel better about himself or herself. For example, an individual may use humor as a means to deal with stressful situations or manage negative emotions (e.g., Martin et al., 2003). The aggressive humor style involves the use of humor to enhance the self by harming others. An individual who uses the aggressive humor style may mock or ridicule others. However, it is important to note that people who employ an aggressive humor style may not be fully aware of the negative consequences of this injurious form of humor (Martin et al., 2003). Finally, the self-defeating humor style involves an individual using humor to belittle himself or herself (e.g., a person making fun of his or her own intelligence) in order to receive the approval of others. Individuals who adopt the self-defeating humor style use humor to please others but this approval comes at their own expense.

Past research has shown that these humor styles are associated with a wide variety of outcomes. For example, Dyck and Holtzman (2013) discovered that the affiliative and self-enhancing humor styles are negatively associated with depressive symptoms and positively related with life satisfaction. In contrast, the aggressive and self-defeating humor styles have been found to be negatively related to happiness (Ford, McCreight, & Richardson, 2014) and positively associated with depressive symptoms (Tucker et al., 2013). In addition, the associations between personality traits and distinct aspects of humor have been explored. For example, basic personality traits (e.g., extraversion, openness) have been found to have a positive relationship with affiliative and self-enhancing humor styles (Veselka et al., 2010a), whereas the

darker aspects of personality have a positive relationship with the aggressive and self-defeating humor styles (e.g., Veselka, Schermer, Martin, & Vernon, 2010b; Zeigler-Hill, McCabe, & Vrabel, 2016). For example, recent work by Zeigler-Hill et al. (2016) found that pathological personality features (e.g., antagonism) had unique positive associations with injurious forms of humor (e.g., aggressive humor style). In addition, psychopathy and Machiavellianism have been found to be positively associated with the aggressive and self-defeating humor styles (Martin, Lastuk, Jeffery, Vernon, & Veselka, 2012; Veselka et al., 2010a). However, narcissism has been found to be positively related with the affiliative humor style which suggests that not all dark personality features are related to injurious forms of humor (Martin et al., 2012; Veselka et al., 2010a). Although, the relationships between certain dark personality features and humor styles have been investigated, the possible connections between spitefulness and these humor styles have not been examined. Consequently, the purpose of the present study was to expand our knowledge about the connections between personality and humor by focusing on the associations that spitefulness had with the humor styles identified by Martin et al. (2003).

1.2. Overview and predictions

Past research has suggested that individuals with high levels of spitefulness are more likely than others to be aggressive, callous, exploitive, and lack empathy (e.g., Marcus & Norris, 2016). Consequently, we believed that spiteful individuals would be likely to avoid using the benign styles of humor and to adopt the injurious styles of humor because of their relatively low levels of concern for the welfare of others. We believe that it is important to examine both the negative relationships that spitefulness is likely to have with the benign humor styles as well as the positive relationships that it is likely to have with the injurious humor styles. Our first hypothesis was that spitefulness would be negatively associated with the benign humor styles (i.e., affiliative humor and self-enhancing humor) because these humor styles are used to enhance relationships with others or enhance the self without inflicting harm. Our second hypothesis was that spitefulness would be positively associated with aggressive humor. The rationale for this prediction was that inflicting harm on others is a core feature of spitefulness so it seemed reasonable that individuals with higher levels of spitefulness may employ humor in such a way that it allows them to belittle, harm, or dominate others even though using this form of humor may result in social or reputational costs (e.g., being disliked by others). Finally, we did not have a clear prediction for the connection that spitefulness would have with the self-defeating humor style. Our uncertainty about the nature of the association between spitefulness and self-defeating humor was driven by the fact that despite certain similarities (i.e., both involve the potential for self-harm) the goals of spitefulness (i.e., inflicting harm on others) and self-defeating humor (i.e., ingratiating the self to others) are quite different. Despite our lack of a prediction about the association between spitefulness and self-defeating humor, we included this humor style for exploratory purposes and reportorial completeness.

We included basic personality dimensions in the present study in order to assess whether spitefulness explained unique variance in humor styles beyond what is accounted for by these basic personality dimensions. More specifically, we used the HEXACO model (Ashton & Lee, 2001) which is a six-factor model of personality. Five of the HEXACO dimensions are similar to the Big Five personality dimensions (i.e., emotionality, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness). However, the HEXACO model includes a sixth dimension – referred to as “honesty-humility” – that has been found to be an important aspect of personality across cultures (see Ashton & Lee, 2007, for a review). We expected to replicate previous results concerning the associations between basic personality dimensions and humor styles (e.g., Martin et al., 2003; Veselka et al., 2010a; see Mendiburo-Seguel, Paez, & Martinez-Sanchez, 2015, for a review). That is, we expected that the

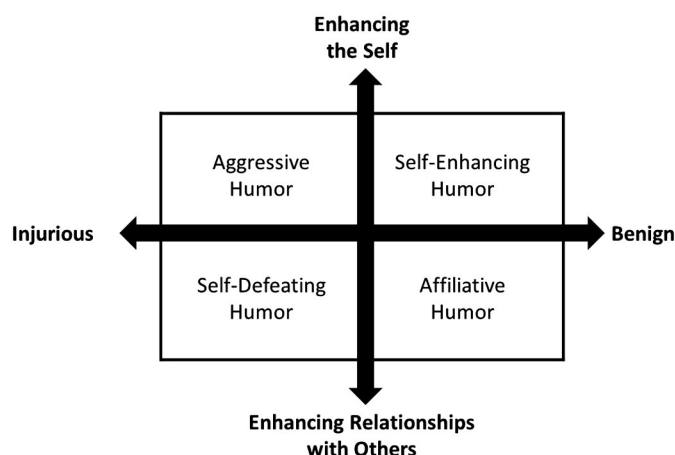


Fig. 1. The humor styles model developed by Martin et al. (2003).

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