



The Big Five personality traits of professional comedians compared to amateur comedians, comedy writers, and college students

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ABSTRACT

Stand-up comedians are a vocational group with unique characteristics: unlike most other entertainers with high creative abilities, they both invent and perform their own work, and audience feedback (laughter or derision) is instantaneous. In this study, the Big Five personality traits (NEOFFI-R) of 31 professional stand-up comedians were compared to those of nine amateur comedians, 10 humor writers and 400 college students. All four groups showed similar neuroticism levels. Professional stand-up comedians were similar to amateur stand-up comedians in most respects. However, compared to college students, professional and amateur stand-up comedians on average showed significantly higher openness, and lower conscientiousness, extraversion, and agreeableness. Compared to stand-up comedians, comedy writers showed higher openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, and agreeableness. These results challenge the stereotype of comedians as neurotic extraverts, and suggest a discrepancy between their stage persona and their true personality traits.

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1. Introduction

Comic performers such as jesters, clowns, and story-tellers have always been popular throughout history and across cultures (Apte, 1985; Nilsen & Nilsen, 2000). In the modern US, live comic performers usually do stand-up comedy, which developed from the American traditions of burlesque and vaudeville, and featured slapstick humor, clowning, impressions, and ridicule (Nilsen & Nilsen, 2000; Wickberg, 1998). Stand-up comedy increased in scale and sophistication throughout the 20th century to become a popular form of entertainment in the past fifty years. It now represents the most competitive, public, high-risk, high-gain form of that distinctively human trait – the capacity for verbal humor.

Psychologists have been quite negligent studying stand-up comedians. While there are several studies on other performing artists such as musicians, actors, and dancers (Chakravarti & Chattopadhyay, 2006; Fitzgerald, 1999; Kogan, 2002; Nettle, 2006), only a few have looked at comedians as a separate group (Fisher & Fisher, 1981; Janus, 1975; Janus, Bess, & Janus, 1978). This neglect may reflect psychologists' bias to study 'serious' forms of creativity, as in the many studies of mathematicians, chess players, architects, visual artists, and scientists (Burch, Pavelis, Hemsley, & Corr, 2006; Katz, 1986; Kogan, 2002; Milgram, Livne, Kaufman, & Baer, 2005). Comedians have become increasingly popular in both the

media and in comedy clubs, something that warrants a special interest in them.

The scientific inquiry of humor can also benefit largely by studying stand-up comedians not only because they are popular but also because they can illuminate some aspects of humor production and appreciation. Although the highly practiced and ritualized stand-up comedy performances do not reflect the typically informal, mundane situations in which more social humor occurs (Provine, 2000), stand-up comedy can highlight some important aspects of humor, just as the study of homicides can demonstrate general patterns of human conflict, and the study of tipping lap dancers at gentleman clubs can illustrate some aspects of human sexuality (Daly & Wilson, 1988; Miller, Tybur, & Jordan, 2007). Comedians must make other people laugh to succeed in their profession, and this can reveal interesting facets of when and why people laugh, as well as what characterizes individuals who are considered by many to be funny. Since comedians tell hundreds of jokes in one show in front of a live audience, they can learn immediately what is funny and what is not.

Because stand-up comedy is a tough, competitive business that requires years of traveling from city to city in relative poverty, obscurity, and insecurity, professionally successful comedians may have special characteristics that allow them to thrive in their chosen careers. Many people try to become professional comedians but relatively few succeed in making a living at it. Unlike actors and musicians, stand-up comedians have no union to support and protect them, no specialized education system (such as the

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M.F.A.) to train them, and no highly publicized awards (such as Oscars or Grammys) to recognize their achievements. They must develop their own publicity, bookings, reputations, and careers through traveling most of the year from one comedy club to the next.

Very little is known about stand-up comedians' lives, and especially about their personality. Taking a psychoanalytical approach and based on projective tests such as Machover Human Figure Drawing, early memories recollection, and analyses of dreams Janus concluded that comedians are sad, depressive, despondent, and angry (Janus, 1975; Janus et al., 1978). Based on Janus' interpretations, male comedians tended to fit bipolar disorder and be introverted, while female comedians tended to be vivacious, frenetic and hypomanic. However, since most of these studies used controversial methods, it is hard to arrive at firm conclusions.

Fisher and Fisher (1981) conducted a more thorough study on the lives of nationally known comic people (28 professional comedians and 15 circus clowns). Compared to other famous actors, the comics showed more references to good and evil themes as found in a Rorschach inkblot test. The comics also differ from the actors in their lower perception of self-unworthiness. Comics were more likely to make negative remarks about themselves compared to the actors, and view themselves as small as measured in the thematic apperception test (TAT).

Both Janus and Fisher & Fisher rely heavily on a psychoanalytical approach and methods that are somewhat dated, open to subjective interpretations and with questionable validity (e.g. Wood, Nezworski, Garb, & Lilienfeld, 2001; Wood, Nezworski, Lilienfeld, & Garb, 2003). Moreover, the comedy scene has become much larger, more sophisticated, and more competitive in the 30 years since these studies were conducted. Comedy clubs used to be scarce, with relatively few full time comedians. Today, there are more than 200 comedy clubs in the US alone and probably thousands of professional comedians.

Comedians may share some personality characteristics with other groups showing unique or extreme abilities. Kogan (2002) makes the distinction between creators and interpreters. Creators such as writers, composers and choreographers produce new works of culture, while actors, musicians and dancers perform and interpret those creative works. Stand-up comedians are one of the few groups that both create and perform their own new material (others include singer-songwriters, slam poetry performers, and speakers at academic conferences). They write their own material (using other comedian's material is considered a serious ethical violation and can lead to suspension from comedy clubs), but they also perform it in front of an audience. They have the freedom to interpret and vary their own jokes as much as they want, and refine them through endless comedy shows. Thus, comedians may be similar to both creators and performers in some aspects but not others.

Comedians' ability to make other people laugh (at least in the narrow sense of performing in front of a crowd) is partially a demonstration of their creativity (Kaufman, Kozbelt, Bromley, Geher, & Miller, 2008; O'Quin & Derks, 1997) and therefore might be similar to other creative people. Studies have shown that creative people such as writers and poets tend to be high on the five factor dimensions of neuroticism and openness, and low on conscientiousness, compared to control groups (Nowakowska, Strong, Santosa, Wang, & Ketter, 2005).

While writers and poets share with comedians the creative aspect of their lives, they do not present or perform their materials as comedians do. Poets and writers occasionally read their material in public, but it is not essential for their success. Playwrights and screenwriters rarely act in their plays or films. Stand-up comedians, on the other hand, must perform their act in front of a live

crowd to succeed as comedians, and therefore become much more visible public figures. Most comedians also want to be famous, and that separates them from many other creative people who usually stay 'behind the scenes' but makes them more similar to other performers, especially actors.

Previous studies found that actors scored high on extraversion, openness to experience and agreeableness compared to the general population (Nettle, 2006). High extraversion among actors is associated with their desire for being the center of social attention and getting the love of the crowds, something they might have in common with comedians (Nettle, 2006). High agreeableness relates to their ability to be sensitive towards others' needs, compassionate and cooperative. As public figures, actors, as well as politicians, tend to be high on this dimension (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Consiglio, Picconi, & Zimbardo, 2003). Comedians do want to be loved and appreciated; however, they often tend to be ideologically provocative and verbally aggressive on stage, which may be perceived as hostile. Actors, like writers and poets, are high on openness to experience, something that is common among all artists (Nowakowska et al., 2005).

The purpose of this study is to explore the personality characteristics of comedians based on a Big Five personality scale (The NEO-FFI-R). The creative writing part of their work, which is similar to the works of poets and writers, suggest that comedians will be high on neuroticism and low on conscientiousness (insofar as impulsivity, lateral thinking, and disinhibition help in writing new comic material). Comedians' quest for attention, fame and recognition should place them high on extraversion, similar to actors. Because comedians tune their act to the crowds' reaction and want to be liked, we might expect them to be high on agreeableness, but because comedy often requires derogation of other people, personalities, ideas, and habits, comedians might score low on agreeableness. Comedians should also score high on the Big Five factor dimension of openness to experience, as most artists and performers tend to be high on this scale.

Since comedians write their own material and also interpret and perform it on stage, it is important to control for each of these intertwined acts. Therefore, in addition to comparing comedians to a sample of people who do not create or perform any humor related material, comedians were also compared to a sample of people that specialize in writing comedy. These writers may occasionally perform the material they write, but their main work and motivation is to write comedy. Lastly, comedians were compared to a sample of aspiring comedians, people who are amateurs in comedy making their first steps into the business. It is expected that this group will generally be similar to professional stand-up comedians (although less extreme compared to other adults), and the two groups might be seen on one continuum of being a stand-up comedian.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Both professional and amateur comedians were recruited through a local comedy club. The club hosts between one and three professional comedians every week, who perform for several nights in a row. The professional comedians come from all over the United States and do not return to perform at the same club for several months. Amateur comedians, who are mostly local, perform for free once a week before the main act, and may return as many times as they wish to introduce their comedy skills. In total, 31 professional comedians (28 males, 3 females, mean age = 38.9, SD = 8.0) and 9 amateur comedians (8 males, 1 female, mean age = 31.6, SD = 9.9) participated in the study.

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