



Brief report

Sense of humor, emotional intelligence, and social competence

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Abstract

Associations among sense of humor, emotional intelligence (EI), and social competence were examined in 111 undergraduate students using measures of humor styles, trait cheerfulness, social competence, and an ability test of EI. Emotional management ability was positively correlated with self-enhancing humor and trait cheerfulness, and negatively correlated with trait bad mood. Ability to accurately perceive emotions was negatively related to aggressive and self-defeating humor. Positive humor styles and trait cheerfulness were positively correlated with various domains of social competence, whereas negative humor styles and trait bad mood were negatively correlated with social competence. Finally, the emotional management facet of EI was positively correlated with several social competence domains.

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1. Introduction

Do people with a better sense of humor have greater social competence and emotional intelligence? Many authors (e.g., Lefcourt, 2001; Long & Graesser, 1988) have suggested that humor plays an important role in interpersonal relationships, as a method of enhancing positive interactions, facilitating self-disclosure and social probing, defusing tension and conflict, saving face, and so on. On the other hand, negative types of humor,

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such as aggressive teasing and sarcasm, may impact negatively on social relationships (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003). Thus, the judicious use of humor may be an important social skill in itself and may also contribute to other social competencies, such as the ability to initiate social interactions, provide emotional support, and manage conflict.

Some studies have found correlations between measures of sense of humor and such social relationship variables as marital satisfaction (e.g., Ziv & Gadish, 1989), perceived social support (Martin et al., 2003), and quality of social interactions (Nezlek & Derks, 2001). However, with the exception of a recent study by Kuiper and colleagues (2004), researchers have not examined associations between humor and the interpersonal abilities or competencies that presumably contribute to relationship quality.

This view of sense of humor as a facet of social competence suggests that humor may also be related to the sorts of emotion-related abilities comprising the construct of emotional intelligence (EI). Recent studies have begun to show links between EI (particularly the emotional management facet) and the quality of people's social interactions (e.g., Lopes et al., 2004). Many of the socially relevant uses of humor mentioned above have to do with emotional awareness and emotion regulation, which are seen as components of EI. In addition, as a method of coping with stress and maintaining a cheerful perspective in the face of adversity (Lefcourt, 2001; Martin, Kuiper, Olinger, & Dance, 1993), humor may be viewed as an important emotion regulation mechanism, and would therefore be expected to correlate with aspects of EI, particularly the ability to manage emotions. Although there is a considerable amount of research evidence for humor as a mechanism for coping with stress (Lefcourt, 2001) as well as relationships between humor and positive and negative moods (Martin et al., 2003), there is no previous research on sense of humor and emotion-related abilities such as those comprising the EI concept.

Sense of humor may be conceptualized in a variety of ways (Martin, 2003). We made use of two multidimensional measures of humor that we consider to be particularly relevant to emotional intelligence and social competence, namely, humor styles and humor as an emotional temperament trait. Humor styles have to do with the ways in which humor is typically expressed (both positively and negatively) in social interactions. Martin et al. (2003) distinguished four humor styles, two of which are thought to be potentially beneficial to relationships and emotional well-being (affiliative and self-enhancing humor), and two that are considered potentially detrimental (aggressive and self-defeating humor). Research using the Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ) to measure these four dimensions has shown that self-enhancing and affiliative humor are positively related to measures of interpersonal adjustment and emotional well-being, whereas aggressive humor is related to hostility, and self-defeating humor is related to negative emotions, low self-esteem, and low social support (Kuiper, Grimshaw, Leite, & Kirsh, 2004; Martin et al., 2003). We expected that these positive and negative styles of humor would also be related in differential ways to EI and interpersonal competence.

As an alternative way of conceptualizing sense of humor, Ruch and colleagues (Ruch & Kohler, 1998; Ruch, Kohler, & van Thriel, 1996) have proposed a temperament-based approach, which conceives of sense of humor as a combination of high trait cheerfulness, low seriousness (high playfulness), and low bad mood, and is measured by the trait form of the State-Trait Cheerfulness Inventory (STCI). Cheerfulness and bad mood are seen as negatively correlated (but still conceptually distinct) emotional components, while the seriousness/playfulness dimension is a more cognitive or attitudinal facet. Since this is primarily an emotion-based

conceptualization of humor, we expected it to be particularly related to dimensions of EI, especially emotional management, in addition to some components of interpersonal competence.

Because past research has found gender differences on humor and EI measures, gender was controlled in the present study. With regard to EI and humor, we expected a positive relationship between emotional management and self-enhancing humor, since this style of humor is viewed as a method of coping with stress and regulating emotions. In addition, we expected that emotional management would be positively related to trait cheerfulness and negatively related to trait bad mood, since successful emotion regulation should result in more positive and less negative moods. Consistent with the findings of Kuiper et al. (2004), we also predicted positive correlations between the ability to initiate interactions and both affiliative and self-enhancing humor, and negative correlations between aggressive humor and the ability to provide emotional support and manage conflicts. Finally, we expected correlations between emotional management and interpersonal competencies (Lopes et al., 2004).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A sample of 111 undergraduate students (45 males and 66 females) at the University of Western Ontario participated in this study as partial fulfillment of a course requirement. Ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 24, with a mean of 18.8 years ($SD = 0.95$).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Humor

The *Humor Styles Questionnaire* (HSQ; Martin et al., 2003) is a 32-item self-report measure that assesses four styles of humor: affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating. The trait version of the *State-Trait Cheerfulness Inventory* (STCI; Ruch et al., 1996) is a 60-item measure assessing trait cheerfulness, seriousness, and bad mood.

2.2.2. Emotional intelligence

The *Mayer–Salovey–Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test* (MSCEIT; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2002) is a computer-administered ability test that consists of 141 items designed to measure four branches of emotional intelligence: (1) emotional perception, (2) emotional facilitation of thought, (3) emotional understanding, and (4) emotional management (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Each of the four branches is measured with two performance tasks. A total emotional intelligence score is computed by summing the four branches. The test was administered via an internet connection, and was scored by Multi-Health Systems, the distributor of the test, using expert norms.

2.2.3. Social competence

The *Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire* (ICQ; Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenberg, & Reis, 1988) is a 40-item self-report measure in which participants are asked to rate their ability to handle a variety of interpersonal tasks in five different social competence domains: initiating relationships, personal disclosure, negative assertion, emotional support, and conflict management.

2.3. Procedure

All the measures were administered in randomized order by means of IBM personal computers in a computer lab. Participants completed the measures in small groups of 7 to 15, and all measures were completed in an average of 50 min.

3. Results and discussion

Males obtained significantly higher mean scores than females on aggressive humor (male $M = 33.93$, female $M = 27.56$, $t(108) = 4.35$, $p < .001$), as previously found by Martin et al. (2003). No significant sex differences were found for the STCI. On the ICQ, males obtained significantly higher scores on the negative assertion scale (male $M = 26.77$, female $M = 23.69$, $t(107) = 2.46$, $p < .05$). With respect to EI, women scored significantly higher than men on all branches except emotional perception, and obtained significantly higher total EI scores (male $M = 95.87$, female $M = 104.51$, $t(109) = -3.42$, $p < .01$), as found in previous research (Mayer et al., 2002). Because of these sex differences on several of the measures, the data were subsequently analyzed using partial correlations, controlling for sex of participant.

Table 1 presents the partial correlations between the humor scales (HSQ and STCI) and the MSCEIT and ICQ scores. With respect to humor styles and EI, as expected, self-enhancing humor was found to be positively correlated with emotional management ($r = .24$, $p < .05$). The use of humor as a coping strategy and ability to maintain a sense of humor in the face of adversity appears to be one aspect of a more general ability to manage

Table 1
Partial correlations between humor scales and MSCEIT and ICQ scales controlling for sex

	Humor Styles Questionnaire				State-Trait Cheerfulness Inventory		
	Affiliative	Self-enhancing	Aggressive	Self-defeating	Cheerfulness	Seriousness	Bad mood
<i>MSCEIT facets</i>							
Emotional perception	-.02	-.10	-.20*	-.28**	.04	-.10	-.20*
Emotional facilitation of thought	-.02	-.05	-.12	-.11	-.01	-.19	-.17
Emotional understanding	.10	.05	.02	.07	.07	-.08	-.25**
Emotional management	.02	.24*	-.17	-.02	.27**	.04	-.25**
Total emotional intelligence	.07	.04	-.16	-.13	.15	-.14	-.34***
<i>ICQ scales</i>							
Initiating relationships	.45***	.39***	.12	.02	.50***	-.23*	-.36***
Negative assertion	.14	.00	.02	-.30**	.14	.14	-.01
Personal disclosure	.23*	.20*	-.10	-.11	.36***	.06	-.26**
Emotional support	.10	.13	-.26**	-.12	.29**	.04	-.24*
Conflict management	-.05	.10	-.32***	-.17	.23*	.13	-.22*
Total interpersonal competence	.28**	.25**	-.12	-.19	.44***	.03	-.31***

Note. MSCEIT, Mayer–Salovey–Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test; ICQ, Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

and regulate one's emotions. Interestingly, although affiliative humor tends to be moderately correlated with self-enhancing humor and the two humor styles often correlate in similar ways with other variables, affiliative humor was unrelated to emotional management, indicating that this is one area where the two positive humor styles are empirically as well as conceptually distinct. On the other hand, aggressive and self-defeating humor were negatively correlated with emotional perception ($r = -.20$, $p < .05$, and $r = -.28$, $p < .01$, respectively), suggesting that these two negative humor styles may involve difficulties in accurately perceiving emotions in oneself and others. People who have difficulties with accurate emotion perception may tend to use humor in inappropriate ways, either to tease and disparage others (aggressive humor) or to excessively disparage themselves and hide their true feelings (self-defeating humor).

Regarding the STCI and EI, as predicted, emotional management was positively related to trait cheerfulness ($r = .27$, $p < .01$) and negatively related to trait bad mood ($r = -.25$, $p < .01$), indicating that individuals who are better able to regulate their emotions tend to experience more cheerful and less negative moods. Trait bad mood was also negatively correlated with emotional perception ($r = -.20$, $p < .05$) and emotional understanding ($r = -.25$, $p < .01$), as well as the total EI score ($r = -.34$, $p < .001$), indicating that low abilities in accurately perceiving and understanding emotions in oneself and others are associated with a prevalence of sad, distressed, grumpy, and grouchy moods. Although cheerfulness and bad mood are quite strongly negatively related, emotional intelligence may be more relevant to reduced bad moods than to increased cheerfulness.

With regard to humor styles and interpersonal competence, consistent with the findings of Kuiper et al. (2004), individuals with higher scores on both affiliative and self-enhancing humor reported being better able to initiate relationships (r 's = .45 and .39, respectively, both $p < .001$), suggesting that these two positive styles of humor may be beneficial for striking up conversations with strangers and initiating friendships. In addition, we found that these two positive humor styles were positively related to personal disclosure (r 's = .23 and .20, respectively, both $p < .05$), suggesting that humor may be one way of revealing personal information about oneself to others. By conveying personal attitudes or potentially embarrassing information in a humorous way, one is able to save face if the information is not well received by saying "I was only joking" (Long & Graesser, 1988).

These two positive forms of humor appear to be unrelated to other interpersonal competencies such as the ability to assert one's personal rights, to provide emotional support, or to manage conflicts. Instead, these competencies seem to be related more to a lack of negative styles of humor than to the presence of positive styles. Like Kuiper et al. (2004), we found that individuals who tend to use aggressive forms of humor report a lower ability to provide emotional support to others ($r = -.26$, $p < .001$) and to manage conflicts in relationships ($r = -.32$, $p < .001$). The hostile attitudes underlying aggressive humor may make it difficult for individuals to be empathic and supportive of others, and aggressive teasing and sarcasm are likely ineffective ways of dealing with conflict, potentially leading to an escalation rather than a diminishment in tension. In addition, we found that individuals who use humor in self-defeating ways report difficulties in asserting their personal rights to others ($r = -.30$, $p < .01$). This is consistent with previous evidence that this humor style is associated with low self-esteem (Kuiper et al., 2004; Martin et al., 2003). This low self-esteem, coupled with frequent angry and hostile feelings (Martin et al., 2003), suggests that people who frequently engage in self-defeating humor may tend to express anger in passive-aggressive rather than assertive ways.

With regard to the STCI, all the ICQ scales except negative assertion were positively related to trait cheerfulness (r 's = .23 to .50) and negatively related to trait bad mood (r 's = $-.22$ to $-.36$). Thus, individuals who experience habitually cheerful moods and a lack of despondent, grumpy, and ill-humored moods are better able to initiate relationships, disclose personal information, provide emotional support to others, and manage conflicts in relationships. These findings are consistent with previous research showing that social skills are related positively to happiness (Argyle & Lu, 1990) and negatively to affective negativity (Furr & Funder, 1998). The more cognitive or attitudinal component of the humorous temperament (playfulness versus seriousness) appears to be less relevant to social skills, except for initiating relationships ($r = -.23, p < .05$). Individuals with a more playful, less serious attitude toward life appear to be better able to strike up conversations and initiate friendships with others, perhaps because of a greater willingness to take interpersonal risks in a playful way. However, serious-minded people appear to be just as capable as more playful individuals at asserting themselves, self-disclosing, providing emotional support, and managing conflicts.

Finally, as predicted, the emotional management facet of EI was positively related to several of the ICQ scales, including initiating relationships ($r = .20, p < .05$), emotional support ($r = .24, p < .05$), and conflict management ($r = .23, p < .05$), and to the total ICQ score ($r = .25, p < .05$). These findings support our predictions that the emotional management facet of EI is particularly relevant to interpersonal abilities. Consistent with Lopes et al. (2004), the ability to manage and regulate emotions in oneself and others seems to be important for dealing with potentially emotionally arousing aspects of social interactions, including initiating relationships, providing emotional support to others, and managing conflicts with others.

A strength of this study is that it used an ability measure of EI rather than a self-report scale, thereby minimizing the likelihood of spurious correlations due to common response biases such as social desirability. On the other hand, the correlations found between the humor measures and the ICQ may be somewhat inflated due to these sorts of self-report biases. A further limitation of the study is the restricted demographics of the participants, who were all undergraduate university students. Further research is needed to replicate these findings in a more diverse population. Finally, the correlational nature of the study precludes our ability to determine the direction of causality in these relationships. It may be that certain forms of humor contribute to various social skills and emotional management ability, but it is also possible that these forms of humor are a consequence of having these particular social and emotional abilities. Experimental investigations are needed to sort out the direction of causality.

In conclusion, the findings suggest that sense of humor is related in complex ways with social skills and emotional intelligence. Some positive humor styles are positively related to some types of social abilities and components of EI, whereas negative humor styles are negatively related to other interpersonal competencies and EI facets. Thus, the absence of maladaptive styles of humor may be just as important as the presence of positive styles in social competence and emotional intelligence (Martin et al., 2003). In addition, the emotional aspects of humor (high cheerfulness and low bad mood) appear to be more relevant to social competence and EI than are the cognitive or attitudinal aspects (playful frame of mind). Finally, our findings provide evidence that interpersonal competencies may partially account for recent findings of positive correlations between the emotional management facet of EI and the quality of interpersonal relationships.

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