13 Humor in organizations: no laughing matter

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Introduction

The positive effects of humor have provided justification for the increasing use of humor interventions in customer services, leadership, problem solving, teams and coping with stress, to name a few applications. These prescriptions ignore the fact that much of the humor in organizational behavior is negative and likely to have detrimental effects on individuals and groups. We outline a multidimensional conceptualization of humor and link the four different types (affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive and self-defeating humor) to individual differences in the production and reactions to humor. We then discuss negative forms of humor as a type of dysfunctional organizational behavior that is related to health risk behaviors, unproductive cultural norms, exclusion of individuals from groups, maintenance of status differentials and negative team cultures. The implications for future research and the need for research on negative humor, along with other forms of dysfunctional organizational behavior, as a counterbalance to the positive psychology research agenda in organizational behavior are discussed.

Humor can be either a coping mechanism for people confronting dysfunctional organizational behavior or a type of dysfunctional behavior that generates stress and other dysfunctional outcomes. The apparently contradictory relationships between humor and dysfunctional behavior are explained by the different types of humor and their differing effects in organizations. In this chapter, we define dysfunctional organizational behavior as behavior that has dysfunctional consequences for individuals and social relationships within organizations. Thus we use 'dysfunctional' to refer to behavior that has deleterious effects rather than behavior that has null or unintended effects. When humor makes a person feel inadequate, lowers self-confidence or causes stress, we consider those dysfunctional outcomes and the humor that produced them dysfunctional behavior. Similarly, humor that excludes individuals from interpersonal relationships and groups or supports cynical cultural beliefs is treated as dysfunctional. Most research has tended to focus on the potentially positive effects of humor, with relatively little attention being given to negative humor and its dysfunctional outcomes.

Humor is a pervasive, naturally occurring behavior in organizational life. Jokes and other sources of humor are communicated face to face, via memos, written reports and other documents and, increasingly, via email and other forms of electronic communication. In organizations, humor has unique properties. For example, as a form of communication, humor cuts across authority and status boundaries, flows in all directions, moves much more rapidly than formal communication, and is largely unfiltered (Barsoux, 1996). Humor also tends to illuminate the paradoxes, ambiguities and contradictions that inevitably arise in organizations despite management's attempts to maintain rational, structured patterns of action (Hatch and Ehrlich, 1993). Humor also brings together cognitive and emotional processes of organizations in a single frame.

Despite the pervasiveness of humor in organizations, there has been very little study of humor in management or organizational settings. The surge of interest in humor that was evident in the psychological literature in the 1980s (Foot, 1991) has not been evident in the writings on management or organizational behavior. The available literature can be divided into prescriptive arguments, which treat humor as a critical organizational resource that can facilitate communication, creativity, problem solving and tolerance (e.g. Boverie et al., 1994), and descriptive studies of conditions, such as paradox and ambiguity, that give rise to humor in organizations (Hatch and Ehrlich, 1993). Very few studies speak to the issues of the effects of humor in organizations.

The lack of evidence notwithstanding, there are many prescriptions and organizational programs based on the assumption that humor is a positive organizational behavior. Such activities, are, for example: establishing a humor room (Kodak Eastman, Hewlett Packard), hiring corporate comedians (American Cancer Society, American Academy of Physician Assistants), clowns (therapeutic clowning in disaster management, Red Nose Response, Inc.), and humor consultants (Owens–Corning Fiberglass used humor consultants to run workshops for their employees when they laid off 40 percent), including humor in the mission statement (Grimes Aerospace, Highway Insurance, Zapatec Software), stressing the utilization of humor in customer service (from a SouthWest Airlines employee: 'There may be 50 ways to leave your lover, but there are only 4 ways out of this airplane'), and implementing fun at work through programs, such as a bring-your-animal-to-work program (Autodesk Software).

The justifications for these interventions were based on claims that humor in organizations is energizing, breaks up boredom and fatigue, and increases attention levels (e.g. laughter releases endorphins into the body, increases oxygen intake, burns up calories), facilitates communication and breaks up conflict and tension, builds relationships, enhances staff cohesion and team work, increases creativity, enhances productivity, provides new perspectives and reduces stress, enhances learning and creates a positive culture. Many of these claims can be backed up by research evidence from areas outside of organizational behavior. However, as we argue in later sections of this chapter, the positive view of humor presented ignores the dysfunctional effects of negative forms of humor, including sarcasm, aggressive and mean-spirited humor and self-defeating humor.

In the following sections, we first describe different types of humor within a two-by-two typology that differentiates humor in terms of valence (positive or negative) and the target (self or other) and links the four different types of humor to personal characteristics and organizational outcomes, with specific attention to gender-related differences. This is followed by a section in which we review and discuss the research that points to the dysfunctional effects of negative humor. In the final section we present our conclusions and some suggestions on future research into the role of humor in dysfunctional organizational behavior.

Humor is more than happy hah hah

As with many psychological constructs, there has been considerable debate over what exactly constitutes humor and the definitions have changed both over time and as a function of the specific issues being investigated. From an individual perspective, humor is a complex mental ability based on the interplay of multiple cognitive–affective processes (Shammi and Stuss, 1999). Neuropsychological research suggests that the right frontal

region mediates humor comprehension. Damage in the right frontal lobe – an area related to integrating cognitive and affective information – disrupts the ability to appreciate humor (Shammi and Stuss, 2003). Measures of a range of basic cognitive functions (working memory, visual scanning, focus on detail) and more complex cognitive abilities (verbal intelligence, creativity) have repeatedly been found to correlate with humor cognition tested in clinical samples (patients with brain lesions) and non-clinical samples of students and other participants (Shammi and Stuss, 1999, 2003; Feingold and Mazzella, 1991). Feingold and Mazzella (1991), however, argue that the humor ability can be distinguished from verbal intelligence. While humor reasoning is related to verbal intelligence, no relation has been found between verbal intelligence and memory for humorous material. Shammi and Stuss (1999) also distinguished humor comprehension from affective humor appreciation. In their study, elderly respondents showed a deficit in the cognitive comprehension of humor – arguably based on diminished cognitive abilities with aging – but not in the affective appreciation of humor (Shammi and Stuss, 1999).

Some authors focus on the positive communicative function of humor and conceptualize it as a social skill that leads to greater acceptance and influence in interpersonal relations (e.g. Dews et al., 1995; Sala, 2000). Observations of joking behavior in various work contexts (e.g. meetings) suggest that humor can provide flexibility in the communication of messages that might otherwise be rejected. Thus humor can be used to critique in socially acceptable ways (Grugulis, 2002; Holmes and Mara, 2002), to point out ambiguity (Grugulis, 2002) or deviations from expectations (Ullian, 1976), or to suggest alternative perspectives within a problem space (Grugulis, 2002; Hatch, 1997). The only experimental study on communicative functions of humor revealed that ironic criticism was perceived as funnier and less insulting than literal criticism, and that irony damaged the addressee–addressor relationship less than literal criticism (Dews et al., 1995). In follow-up qualitative analyses the authors identified a self-protective function of irony. Irony regarding poor performance protected the addressee's face; irony regarding offensive behavior protected the addressor's face (Dews et al., 1995).

Humor is also defined in terms of its effects on the recipient (e.g.Weaver and Cotrell, 1987: 177), with a particular emphasis on laughing, smiling, or a feeling of amusement. The focus on these three responses is due to their recognized benefits. Laughing, that is, genuine laughter, engages positive affect or emotion via the sympathetic nervous system and is the basis of much of the research on humor and its effects. It is also noteworthy that forced laughter, as may occur in a group audience, can also increase positive affect, whereas suppressed laughter, which can occur in group or one-on-one contexts, appears to render the recipient's perception of humor as being less funny, although it is not clear whether suppressed laughter reduces positive affect (Cetola and Reno, 1985). A second response to humor, smiling, is short of laughing but it can, with the often-accompanying body relaxation, via efferent feedback from the muscles, intensify positive affect (Laird, 1974). On the other hand, suppressed smiling, as may occur in 'serious' management situations, can reduce felt affect (Lanzetta et al., 1976; Petty et al., 1983; see also Zillmann, 1991). The third response to humor, a feeling of amusement, should really be referred to as a perception of amusement, that is, the cognitive apprehension that humor has occurred. This perception can occur without felt affect. Laughter, smiling and feelings of amusement are most reliably elicited by some form of perceived incongruity (such as a deliberate joke) but can also be elicited, although less consistently, in situations of

failure or disappointment, relief from a threat, or elation at mastering a task (Boverie et al., 1994).

A limitation of the typical conceptualizations of humor described above is their narrow focus on humor as an adaptive response with positive benefits for the individuals involved. They ignore the potential for negative or maladaptive outcomes, such as might arise when one person is the target of an ethnic joke that others find funny. More recently, researchers have begun to define humor as a multidimensional construct that can be either positive or negative in tone and effects (Kirsh and Kuiper, 2003; Martin et al., 2003) and targeted at either the self or some other person (Martin et al., 2003). Positive and negative humor are considered adaptive and maladaptive (i.e. dysfunctional), respectively, in their consequences for the target. The four types of humor and different manifestations of the each type are shown in Figure 13.1. The two types of adaptive or functional humor (shown in Quadrants 1 and 2 of Figure 13.1) can be effective mechanisms for coping with dysfunctional organizational behavior. The two types of maladaptive humor shown in Quadrants 3 and 4 of Figure 13.1 can be examples of dysfunctional organizational behavior.

The first of the two adaptive forms (positive-self) is shown in Quadrant 1 and includes self-enhancing humor that is used to cope with potentially stressful events and situations.

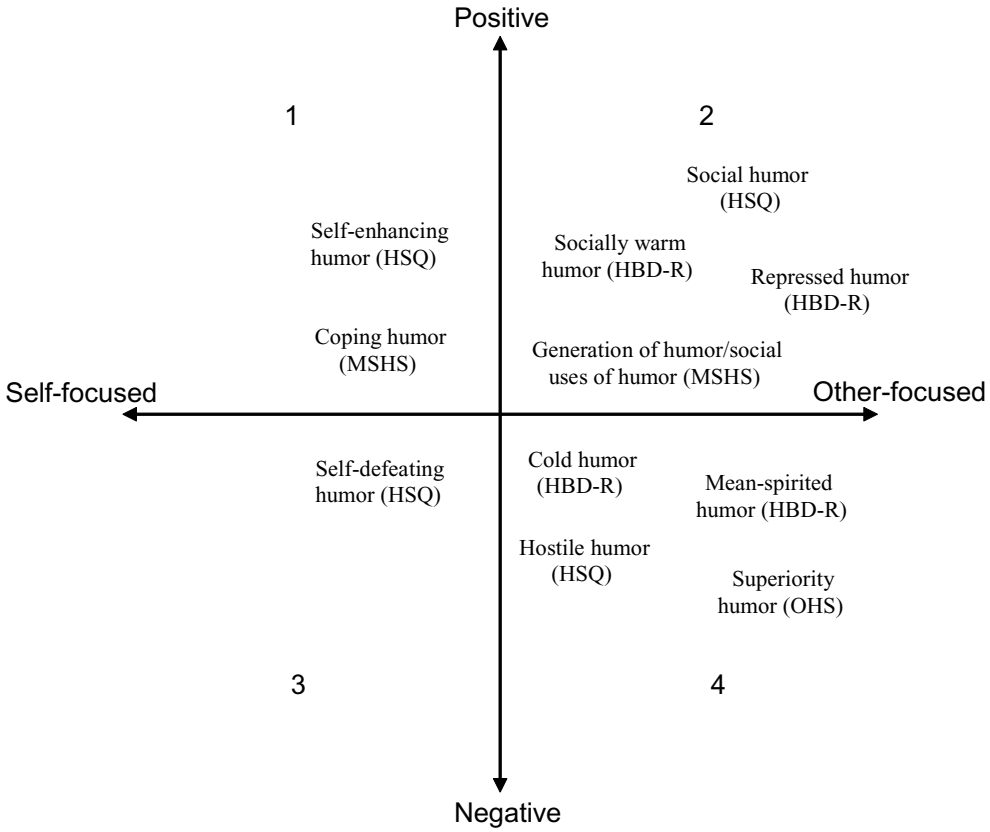

Figure 13.1 Two-dimensional model of workplace humor

Self-enhancing or coping humor helps minimize negative emotional reactions to stressors while maintaining a realistic perspective on problems.

Quadrant 2 (positive-other) is a socially adaptive style of affiliative humor that is used to enhance interpersonal and social relationships through the non-hostile use of jokes and banter that reduce interpersonal tensions. Affiliative humor is employed to raise group morale, identity and cohesiveness by reducing conflicts and increasing others' feelings of well-being (Kuiper et al., 2004). Affiliative humor is often spontaneous and creates a feeling of belonging to a common, if temporary, community among those individuals who share in the joke.

The two types of maladaptive or dysfunctional humor are shown in Quadrants 3 and 4 of Figure 13.1. Quadrant 3 (negative-self) includes humor that is expressed in a self-deprecating manner, often at a high personal cost. Kuiper et al. (2004) describe Quadrant 3 style humor as 'strained and obsequious'. Dysfunctional, self-targeted humor is evident in the excessive use of self-disparaging and ingratiating comments made during what are generally considered inappropriate attempts to fit into social groups or to gain the approval of others. High levels of self-defeating humor may also be used to mask negative feelings and anxieties or to avoid dealing constructively with a problem (Martin et al., 2003; Kuiper et al., 2004). Quadrant 3 humor is associated with avoidance, emotional neediness and low self-esteem.

Quadrant 4 (negative-other) includes boorish humor and aggressive use of humor in which the source displays a lack of concern or respect for others through coarse or vulgar displays or through mean-spirited and sarcastic comments (Kuiper et al., 2004). Aggressive humor includes a variety of negative techniques, such as teasing, ridicule, sarcasm and disparagement. The aim of Quadrant 4 humor is to denigrate and put down others and is executed without regard for its potential negative impact on the target(s). Continual use of aggressive humor against the same target(s) will eventually alienate the individual(s) targeted and seriously impair social and interpersonal relationships with them (Kuiper et al., 2004).

Studies of the relationships between humor and leadership behavior provide support for the argument that positive humor and negative humor (self and other-directed) have differential effects on organizational behavior. The use of positive humor or similarly 'warm humorous conduct' (Priest and Swain, 2002), and a 'hedonic tone' of humor (Cooper, 2003) is related to the behavior and effectiveness of leaders, evaluations of the leader by subordinates and leader–member relationships. Leaders who use more positive humor in their interactions with staff and peers tend to also receive higher ratings from subordinates for both task-oriented behavior and relationship-oriented behaviors and to be valued as more effective in their roles (Decker and Rotondo, 2001). Positive (functional) humor has also been found to be positively related to subordinates' evaluation of leader effectiveness (Priest and Swain), and leader–member exchange quality (Cooper, 2003). The amount of negative (dysfunctional) humor, including aggressive, deprecating and boorish humor, used by a leader is related to lower ratings of the leader's task behaviors and relationship behavior by his or her subordinates (Decker and Rotondo, 2001).

Correlational studies have also shown that some of the different types of humor in Figure 13.1 are associated with different organizational outcomes. In a study by Susa (2002), superiority humor (Quadrant 4) was negatively related to organizational climate, job satisfaction, commitment, creativity, performance and attendance, whereas the more

positive incongruity humor and relief humor (Quadrants 1 and 2) were positively related to the same organizational variables.

Responses to the different types of humor shown in Figure 13.1 also can vary as a function of the target's motivation for the task being performed and the context in which the humor occurs. In school settings, for example, students with a low motivation for academic tasks had a greater preference for negative, hostile and self-defeating humor than for more positive self-enhancing and affiliative humor (Saroglou and Scariot, 2002). The preference for negative forms of humor was not evident for more highly motivated students. In addition, the cultural background of employees needs to be considered when making assumptions about preferred types of humor. For example, American employees reported higher usage of self-enhancing and self-defeating humor than did Arabic employees (Kalliny et al., 2006).

In summary, humor is becoming an increasingly popular organizational intervention, but the prescriptions are not based on any strong body of evidence of the proclaimed effects from organizational research. In addition, justifications for humor interventions in organizations are based exclusively on positive forms of humor (i.e. self-enhancing and affiliative humor), and the beneficial physiological and psychologic effects that are related to the laughing, smiling and amusement produced by positive humor. To this point, negative dysfunctional forms of humor (i.e. self-defeating and aggressive humor) and their consequences have received relatively little attention.

Individual differences

Individuals differ in their mental and emotional responses to situations, including humor, and these differences could be expected to moderate both the production and the effects of different types of humor. The encoding of a message as humorous or funny, which will often be an automatic, subconscious process, will influence the individual's internal reactions, including the experience of positive affect and feelings of amusement or joy, and overt behavior, including smiling and laughter. Alternative interpretations, such as 'obvious', 'offensive', 'disgusting' or 'sick' will produce very different internal responses. These may be feelings of dissatisfaction, embarrassment, incompetence, anger or disgust and any number of associated behavioral responses, but not normally spontaneous smiling or laughter. However, circumstances do frequently arise when the recipient's overt behavior includes laughter or smiling but the internal affective reactions are neutral or negative. For example, a person may laugh at a joke that he or she finds personally offensive, because of deference to the teller or to avoid the embarrassment or conflict that may arise from a more critical response.

Jokers and killjoys

While it is generally accepted that people differ in their appreciation of and reactions to different types of humor, studies of humor as a personality trait have not yet identified a psychometrically valid measure that can effectively differentiate those who have a sense of humor from those who don't. Self-report measures for sense of humor have been found to have only weak correlations with behavioral measures of humor conduct, which is at least partly due to the weak psychrometric properties of the scales used to measure sense of humor (Köhler and Ruch, 1996). Also, behavioral data on humor conduct show that humor appreciation can be distinguished from humor production (Köhler and Ruch, 1996).

Table 13.1 Humor usage and personality factors

		Direction	
		Self	Other
Valence	Positive	*e.g. self-enhancing* • Openness (+) • Agreeableness (+) • Agency • Communion • Self-esteem (+)	*e.g. affiliative* • Openness (+) • Agreeableness (+) • Agency • Communion • Self-esteem (+)
	Negative	*e.g. self-defeating* • Conscientiousness (−) • Emotional stability (−) • Agency • Communion • Security in attachment (−) • Self-esteem (−)	*e.g., aggressive* • Conscientiousness (−) • Agreeableness (−) • Agency • Communion

While there is a lack of support for a valid measure of a humor trait, research correlating humor responses with other more valid measures of personality measures and demographic variables, specifically gender, have identified more systematic individual differences in the production and/or responses to different types of humor.

Preferences for the four types of humor in Figure 13.1 have been shown to have significant relationships with a range of indicators of personality and well-being, which basically follow the pattern in Table 13.1 (based on findings reported in Martin et al., 2003; Saroglou and Scariot, 2002). Openness and agreeableness are associated with a positive (self- and other-directed) sense of humor, whereas neuroticism and lack of conscientiousness are associated with a negative (self- and/or other-directed) sense of humor (Saroglou and Scariot; see Table 13.1). Extraversion is related to high humor production behavior. Positive aspects of the higher-order personality factors agency and communion were related to a positive sense of humor (adapt and socially skilled humor), whereas negative aspects of agency and communion were related to a negative sense of humor (Kirsch and Kuiper, 2003). Agency and communion have also been established as moderators for the facilitative effect of humor on well-being (Kuiper and Borowicz-Sibenik, 2005; see Kuiper et al., 2005, 2004).

Men and women may be different

One individual difference that frequently arises as a moderator of both the production and effects of different types of humor is the gender of the participants in the study. Men and women produce different amounts of and respond differently to positive and negative humor. However, while differences between men and women are reported in several studies of humor production and problem-solving processes, they are not the product of any systematic theory or research program. Therefore, because there are no clear discernible patterns in the results reported, the interpretation of the results, while interesting, is largely speculative at this stage.

Several organizational studies have reported differences between the levels of humor used by male and female leaders and in the impacts of the different types of humor when it is used by men versus women. In a study of executive level leadership roles, Sala (2000) found that female executives employed more overall humor than male executives, but male executives employed more negative (dysfunctional) humor than their female counterparts. Thus the greater production of total humor, positive and negative, by female executives was due to their significantly greater use of positive humor compared to male executives. Decker and Rotondo (2001), however, found that male managers used more humor (negative and positive) compared to female managers. The gender of the manager also moderated the impact of humor use on leadership ratings of the manager by their subordinates. Female managers received higher leadership ratings than male managers when using positive humor, but lower ratings than male managers when using negative humor (Decker and Rotondo, 2001).

Gender differences have been found in the production of humor in difficult social situations in several studies. Male students are significantly more likely to react with humor in socially awkward situations than female students; female students are more likely to show a helping response (e.g. Cox et al., 1990).

Studies of different problem-solving processes have identified several male–female differences in reactions to and the use of information when humor is included as part of the task presentation. For example, gender has been shown to moderate the impact of humor on the recall and use of information. Recent experimental studies support the assumption that presenting material in a humorous way facilitates its recall (Schmidt, 2002; Thompson, 2001; Fischer and Thussbas, 2000). Within a classroom setting Casper (1999) analyzed the impact of two different humorous learning contexts on performance. Female students outperformed male students when the material was presented with a humorous message that was irrelevant to the material to be learned, and when no laughter was involved. Under laughter conditions, however, male students outperformed female students.

Humor also has been shown to have more beneficial effects for women than men in some, but not all, cognitive abilities tests. After reviewing studies of the effects including humor in testing materials, McMorris et al. (1997) concluded that gender, along with anxiety and humor appreciation, should be included as a potential moderator of humor effects on test performance. For example, the inclusion of humor in test materials had differential effects for men and women in their performance of analogy tasks used to assess reasoning skills. The inclusion of humor slowed the responses of men but not of women (Belanger et al., 1998). In the same study the inclusion of humor produced faster responses by both men and women on mental rotation tasks used to assess visual flexibility.

One of the often-mentioned benefits of humor in problem-solving processes is its potential role as a mechanism for coping with anxiety and other sources of negative arousal that can interfere with information processing. The effectiveness of humor as a coping mechanism for anxiety has been found different for men and woman in a study by Abel and Maxwell (2002). In their study, trait humor was related to lower anxiety for women but not for men. Also, the effects of a humor induction on anxiety and mood reactions differed for men and women, depending on the stressfulness of the problem situation. Humor led to lower anxiety and more positive mood reactions by women under low stress conditions, whereas introduction of humor had more beneficial effects on anxiety

and mood for men under high stress conditions (Abel and Maxwell, 2002). However, in a later experimental study by Filipowicz (2006) manipulations of humor had more beneficial effects for men than for women. Male participants showed broader affective reactions to the humorous stimuli in a video and increased their performance more on a subsequent creativity task compared to female participants (Filipowicz, 2006). Stress was not manipulated in the Filipowicz study and the problem solving was therefore under conditions that would approximate the low stress condition in the Abel and Maxwell study. Without access to the videotape used for the humor induction it is not clear if the humor presented was positive, negative, or some combination of the two. Therefore we cannot rule out the type of humor as a possible explanation for the male–female differences.

In summary, measures of a sense of humor have not been validated to the point that they are reliably related to the actual production and reactions to humor, but preferences for different styles of humor are related to other psychometrically valid measures of personality, particularly the five-factor model. Male–female differences keep popping up in studies but the results are rarely based on theory, show no clear pattern of differences, and are sometimes contradictory. The implications of these findings are taken up in the discussion, following a consideration of humor as a form of dysfunctional organizational behavior.

Humor as dysfunctional organizational behavior

The almost universal emphasis on the positive functions of humor in research studies and popular prescriptive accounts of humor in organizations ignores the potential negative cognitive and emotional effects of humor that are apparent to anyone who has been the target of the superior, aggressive, mean-spirited and deprecating types of humor that are represented in Quadrant 4 of Figure 13.1. Many jokes represent an attack on the identity of individuals who are members of groups that are targeted in jokes. Ethnic jokes are an obvious example, but identity threats in the form of jokes within organizations can be targeted at occupations, age cohorts, organizational level, gender and many other groups. Humor that is used to include members within a group or community can also be used to exclude people.

In the discussion that follows we will first highlight some findings where humor has been found to have some unexpected negative effects: unexpected because the studies were conducted within the narrow conceptualization of humor as a coping mechanism that only leads to positive effects. In particular we focus on evidence for negative humor as a potential health risk behavior. This is followed by a discussion of research illustrating the effects of negative forms of humor in organizational culture, in group formation processes, relationships between high- and low-status individuals and group performance. This review is necessarily selective because most research has focused on positive humor and a brief review of indicative findings from that research is presented at the end of the section for reasons of balance.

While there is evidence that humor can ameliorate the experienced effects of self-reported everyday life stressors (Abel, 2002; Kuiper et al., 1993) and experimentally induced stress (Kuiper et al., 1995), there is very little evidence that these effects get translated into better health outcomes, the many claims for the positive health effects of humor notwithstanding. The first longitudinal study of the causal effects of humor usage on health and well-being found no evidence for a facilitative effect of humor in a three-year

study of Finnish police officers (Kerkkänen et al., 2004). Neither self-reported nor peer-rated sense of humor predicted subsequent health and well-being of the Finish police officers in the study. In a follow-up longitudinal study, the same authors report that humor was, unexpectedly, positively related to health risk behaviors, such as smoking, and developing a high body mass index (BMI) (Kerkkänen et al., 2004). Kuiper and Borowicz-Sibenik (2005) suggest that the higher-order personality factors of agency and communion may moderate the effect of humor on health outcomes.

An alternative possible explanation for the findings of the Kerkkänen et al. (2004) studies and for other studies that have failed to find a relationship between humor and health outcomes is that health effects depend upon the type as well as the level of humor that is commonly used by the people being studied. If the prevailing type of humor used by officers in the police departments studied by Kerkkänen et al. (2004) was aggressive and self-deprecating, then the humor may have been a cause of the increased smoking and other negative health effects; or negative humor is a health risk behavior that occurs together with other risk behavior such as smoking. In support of this argument is correlational research, mainly with student samples, in which the different types of humor are identified in the measurement process. These studies show that negative forms of humor are negatively related to a range of health and well-being indicators. Those who use aggressive and, particularly, self-deprecating types of humor are more likely to report higher levels of anxiety, depression and negative self-judgments and lower levels of self-esteem and security in attachments (self-focused maladaptive humor, Kuiper et al., 2004; hostile and self-defeating humor, Saroglou and Scariot, 2002).

Further support for the hypothesis that negative humor can be a health risk behavior comes from studies of the relationships between sense of humor and depression (Overholster, 1992; Kuiper and Borowicz-Sibenik, 2005). While positive-self-focused forms of humor, such as coping humor and self-enhancing humor, have been found to be negatively related to depression, negative-self-focused forms of humor, such as self-defeating humor, have been found to be positively related to depression (Kuiper et al., 2004).

Even positive humor may be dysfunctional for certain targets in certain circumstances. Humor has been identified as a defining characteristic of work cultures in organizations and teams (Holmes and Marra, 2002). This insight has led to many attempts to create fun cultures at work, such as that exemplified by South West Airlines, where a sense of humor is one of the selection criteria used when hiring staff and the pervasive sense of fun at work is seen as a cultural attribute that contributes to the competitive advantage of the company (Hallowell, 1996). However, there are also risks associated with attempts to create or support a humorous organizational work culture. Fleming (2005) reported increased cynicism among employees in one analyzed company when the management supported a 'fun' culture.

Organizational culture can also include negative humor and other forms of dysfunctional organizational behavior as norms. Taylor and Bain (2003) observed that among employees of two call centres subversive satire was a cultural norm and was used to weaken the managerial authority. Roy's (1960) classic participant observation study of work culture, indexed by the 'times' and 'themes' of the informal social interactions among a small group of machine operators within a factory, highlighted the role of negative humor in organizational culture. The 'times' were breaks that punctuated the working

day and were built around practical jokes in which one member was the target. The banana time of the title was a daily ritual in which one member of the group would consume the banana brought by another for his own lunch, always announcing 'banana time'. The 'themes' communicated through humor covered racial tensions and status differentials. Qualitative work of the type done by Roy (1958) may be the only way to effectively study the role of negative humor in organizational culture. This point is taken up in the discussion.

Negative humor and the selective use of positive humor also serve a power function that benefit some and not others in relationships, such as occur in relationships between in-group and out-group members and organizational members of differing status. When humor is used to create a sense of community between group members and foster group cohesion, the process of socialization often includes negative humor to exclude people whom the group rejects and to strengthen the sense of identity among the in group (e.g. Vinton, 1989). An example of negative humor in the socialization processes comes from a qualitative study by Terrion and Ashford (2002), who studied participants during a six-week executive development program. One of their findings was that when participants were placed in work groups they used negative put-down humor against other participants in the program to promote the identity of their newly established group. Studies of established work teams have also identified the emergence of humor networks in which negative humor is used to exclude out-group members and to form a stronger sense of community amongst in-group members (Duncan and Feisal, 1989).

Negative humor is used by both high- and low-status people in their relationships with one another, but the specific forms of humor vary with the status of the individual and the specific work setting (Duncan, 1985). Negative humor is often used by high-status individuals to control and maintain differentials between them and lower-status individuals (e.g. Vinton, 1989). For low-status individuals, negative humor (e.g. subversive humor) can be used to challenge authority (e.g. Brown and Keegan, 1999; Holmes and Marra, 2002). Other studies point to the fact that the use of humor in relationships between low- and high-status individuals varies from organization to organization. For example, Duncan (1985) found high- and low-status individuals in health care work teams were part of the same humor network and had no extra humor status, whereas high-status individuals (managers) in business groups were less often the focus of positive or negative humor.

Studies that attempt to link humor with group performance outcomes will often report a positive impact on the affective reactions of participants but a null effect for subsequent performance (e.g. Filipowicz, 2002). In an earlier review of studies of the relationship between humor and performance, Pollio and Bainum (1983) attributed mixed results of manipulated humor effects on group performance (group problem solving) to the humor index employed. If 'total seconds of laughter' was considered as a measure of group humor, positive effects of group humor on group performance (anagram tasks) were found; no effects were found, however, if 'number of jokes' was considered as a measure of group humor. Findings also suggest that different effects of humor can be expected for different types of tasks. While positive effects were reported for anagram tasks, no effects were found for decision-making tasks (Pollio and Bainum, 1983). Another possible explanation is that the effects of humor on many work group performance outcomes are more cumulative and influence performance through causal pathways than the affective

responses to jokes. Over time, humor can become embedded in various cultural norms that may influence group performance (e.g. Roy, 1960). As was illustrated in our earlier discussion of culture, positive and negative humor may give rise to or reinforce different norms with different implications for group performance.

The leadership of groups is also affected by the types of humor used. While there is evidence that effective leaders use more humor than ineffective leaders (Priest and Swain, 2002; Holmes and Marra, 2006; Sala, 2000; Aviolo et al., 1999); it is the type of humor used that seems to define its effects. Specifically, negative humor is associated with low leadership performance. Managers who used negative humor received poor ratings in leadership outcome variables, such as task and relationship behavior, especially for female leaders (Decker and Rotondo, 2001). Also the use of negative humor by a leader is likely to be reciprocated by the members of the group (Decker and Rotondo, 1999), thus initiating a cycle that can lead to the creation of a negative and potentially less productive work culture.

In summary, although the current state of evidence is more suggestive than conclusive, negative humor has the potential to be a dysfunctional form of organizational behavior that is related to health risk behaviors, unproductive cultural norms, exclusion of individuals from groups, maintenance of status differentials and negative team cultures. As with the earlier results reported for gender differences, more research is needed on occurrence, determinants and outcomes of negative humor to establish the causal dynamics and generalizability of these relationships.

It's not all bad – laughter is good medicine

Our discussion of humor as a dysfunctional organizational behavior has been based on a necessarily selective review of the literature. While this has served to highlight the potential for dysfunctional effects of humor and the relative lack of research on those effects, it does not reflect the findings from the extensive body of research on positive humor and its effects. In summary, positive humor has been shown to have many beneficial effects, including:

1. Lower experienced stress in response to stressors (e.g. Abel, 2002; Kuiper et al., 1993; Lefcourt et al., 1995), including quicker physiological adaptation (e.g. reduction in systolic blood pressure) to stressful situations (e.g. Lefcourt et al., 1995).
2. More positive mood and emotional responses (e.g. Abel and Maxwell, 2002; Lehman et al., 2001; Moran and Massam, 1999; Szabo et al., 2005).
3. Reduction of anxiety levels (Szabo et al., 2005; Abel and Maxwell, 2002).
4. Lower levels of exhaustion and burnout in stressful occupations (e.g. Killian, 2005; Mesmer, 2001; Talbot, 2000).
5. Higher levels of psychological well-being and lower frequency of psychosomatic illnesses (e.g. Fry, 1995; Cavanaugh, 2002; Sanders, 2004; Francis et al., 1999).
6. Higher self-esteem (e.g. Martin et al., 2003).

This summary of findings is illustrative of the many benefits that can flow from self-enhancing, affiliative and other forms of positive humor. What emerges from the research is that positive humor helps people to cope better with stressful situations, both psychologically and physiologically, and to maintain a positive sense of self-worth. At the risk

of overstatement, it should be stressed that attributing these outcomes to humor, rather than to positive humor, is misleading.

Conclusion

Our aim in this review has not been to question the potential beneficial effects that laughter, smiling and amusement can bring to people at work. Humor that produces these effects in members of the target audience has clear psychological and physiological benefits. However, not all humor is funny for all people all of the time and not all humor produces positive effects. In particular, much humor is negative in tone and has potentially detrimental effects for the individuals, groups and organizations, and therefore can rightly be considered a form of dysfunctional organizational behavior. Our review highlights for us the need for further research that examines the occurrence, determinants and effects of negative humor in organizations, in order to provide a balanced perspective on the role of humor in organizational behavior and to craft interventions that both minimize the potential negative effects while seeking to enhance the beneficial effects that can flow from positive forms of humor. To this end, we would like to comment on the conceptualization of the role of humor in organizations and the methods that are likely to be most effective in the study of negative humor in organizational behavior.

One clear implication of our review is that organizational researchers need to conceptualize humor as a multidimensional construct that includes both negative and positive forms of humor. In addition a dynamic conceptualization of the construct will need to take account of norm formation and other social factors, such as status differentials, that will interact with humor displays to affect the outcomes. It is possible, for example, that the frequent but so far incoherent gender differences in reactions to humor are the product of differential humor norms that are held by and about males and females. One hypothesis worthy of examination is that humor norms for females support greater use of positive, particularly affiliative, forms of humor when dealing with others and more self-defeating humor in self-regulatory activities. By way of contrast, male norms might support greater use of aggressive and self-enhancing forms of humor. These hypotheses could be extended into predictions of cultural norms about humor for male- versus female-dominated occupational groups and organizations and about the consequences of cultural fit (or misfit) for males and females.

In order to progress a research agenda of humor as dysfunctional organizational behavior, the current research points to the importance of qualitative field research designs for identifying the occurrence and outcomes of negative humor. In the Roy (1960) and Terrion and Ashford (2002) studies, participants were observed unobtrusively over an extended period. In both cases the pattern of negative humor and its functions only became evident over time. Also, it was probably the case that displays of negative humor, which may present an unflattering view of the person being studied, are more likely to be constrained when data collection is obviously focused on displays of humor. This social desirability effect, plus the fact that human ethics committees may be reluctant to approve studies with inductions of negative humor, may account for the bias toward positive humor, at least in experimental studies.

In concluding, we would like to highlight what we see as the risk to the field of organizational behavior in the application of positive psychology (e.g. Luthans, 2005; Turner et al., 2002; Wright, 2003), which we see as including the biases and limitations that we

have identified in the humor research through our analysis of the dysfunctional effects of humor. Humor research, with its bias toward positive humor, is both an exemplar and source of ideas for the newly emerging field of positive psychology, which focuses on the study of individual, social and institutional determinants of human happiness (e.g. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). On his website 'Authentic Happiness', the founder of positive psychology, Martin Seligman, proclaims that 'his research has demonstrated that it is possible to be happier – to feel more satisfied, to be more engaged with life, find more meaning, have higher hopes, and probably even laugh and smile more, regardless of one's circumstances', and that 'he is now turning his attention to training Positive Psychologists, individuals whose practice will make the world a happier place'. Not surprisingly, the application of positive psychology within organizational behavior (Luthans, 2005; Turner et al., 2002; Wright, 2003) shows the same positive bias. As our review of humor research shows, the risk of focusing on positive organizational behavior is that it ignores the dysfunctional organizations' behavior and the many negative outcomes that this can produce for individual, groups and organizations.

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