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A Study on Sense of Humour and Psychological Wellbeing among Young and Middle Adults

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Abstract:

Humour is a fundamental aspect of human experience occurring in different forms in different individuals across varied cultures and situations. Sense of humour is the ability of an individual to appreciate humour whether created by him or others. Recent researches in psychology have established the link between sense of humour and wellbeing in various aspects. Psychological well-being refers to how people evaluate their lives (Diener, 1997). The study investigates the level and styles of humour in young and middle adults and the difference in the humour styles between the two sample groups. Further to study the relationship between situational humour response and psychological wellbeing among adults. To study the relationship between humour styles and psychological wellbeing among adults. And to explore the effect of demographic variables on the difference in styles of humour employed by the target sample. Expost-facto research design is adopted for the study. N=108 (63) in young adults and (45) in middle adults. Statistical Analysis included are independent sample 't' test and Pearson's product moment correlation. The result shows that situational humour response is correlated with Environmental mastery among adults. Affiliative humour style is positively correlated with environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations and self-acceptance. Aggressive humour style is negatively correlated with personal growth, positive relations, purpose in life and self-acceptance. Self-defeating humour style is negatively correlated with personal growth and purpose in life. There is a significant difference in Affiliative and aggressive humour style between young and middle adults. Also there is a significant difference in the dimensions of psychological well-being (Environmental Mastery, Personal Growth, Positive Relations, Purpose in life and Self-acceptance) between young and middle adults. There is gender difference in Aggressive and Self-defeating humour style. There is a significant difference in Affiliative humour style between unemployed and employed adults.

Keywords: *Sense of humour, psychological well-being young adults, middle adults*

1. Introduction

Today's modern world has been characterized by the fast pace mechanical life. Human beings are enslaved in a tedious run behind material living which is perceived as ultimate happiness but remains virtual. In its process mankind has failed to appreciate several fundamental phenomenon of human experiences. Humour is one such fundamental aspect of human experience occurring in different forms (jokes, witticisms, funny accidents, sarcasms, teasing etc) in different individuals across varied cultures and situations. It is a subjective term. Sociologically, humour expresses itself differently across gender, culture, nationality, age, social setting, and a number of other factors amongst individual. "Humour is essentially an emotional response of mirth in a social context that is elicited by a perception of playful incongruity and is expressed through smiling and laughter." (Rod A.Martin). Sense of humour is the ability of an individual to appreciate humour whether created by him or others. The word humour has changed its meaning in the 200 years from (Latin: *humor*, "body fluid"), which supposedly provided people with their individual temperament to a general term which describes is the tendency of particular cognitive experiences to provoke laughter and provide amusement. Humour in psychology is entwined with different aspects such as cognition, emotion (amusement, mirth, hilarity, cheerfulness and merriment), social life and well-being. It serves numerous psychological functions like: cognitive and social function of positive emotions, for social communication and influence, tension relief and coping, selection of sexual partner (94% females and 92% males would prefer their partner to be humorous rather than serious (Observer magazine, 2003).

Humour styles: It is a topic of research in the field of personality psychology related to the ways in which individuals differ in their use of humour in everyday life. People of all ages and backgrounds engage in humour, but the way they use it can vary greatly. Although humour styles can vary slightly depending on the situation, they tend to be a relatively stable personality characteristic among individuals. Affiliative humour is defined as the style of humour used to enhance one's relationships with others in a benevolent, positive manner. Individuals high in this dimension often use humour as a way to charm and amuse others, ease tension among others, and improve relationships. Self-enhancing humour is a style of humour related to having a good-natured attitude toward life, having the ability to laugh at yourself, your circumstances and the idiosyncrasies of life in constructive, non-detrimental manner. It is used by individuals to enhance the self in a benevolent, positive manner. Coping or emotion-regulating humour in which individuals use humour to look on the bright side of a bad situation. Aggressive humour is a style of humour that is potentially detrimental towards others. This type of humour is characterized by the use of sarcasm, put-downs, teasing, criticism, ridicule, and other types of humour used at the expense of others. Self-defeating humour is the style of humour characterized by the use of potentially detrimental humour towards the self in order to gain approval from others. Individuals high in this dimension engage in self-disparaging humour in which laughter is often at their own expense. The four humour styles were found to be differently related to personality. Social and self-enhancing humour styles were positively related to Agreeableness, Openness, and Self-esteem, whereas hostile humour was negatively related to Agreeableness and Conscientiousness. Self-defeating humour was negatively related to emotional stability, Conscientiousness, security in attachment and Self-esteem. Finally students' humour styles neither direct nor were indirect predictors of school performance, but defeating humour and hostile humour styles typical of students with low school motivation. (Saroglou & Scariot, 2002).

Well-being: Well-being is a general term for the condition of an individual or group, for example their social, economic, psychological, spiritual or medical state; high well-being means that, in some sense, the individual or group's experience is positive, while low well-being is associated with negative happenings. Broadly, well-being has been defined from two perspectives. The clinical perspective defines well-being as the absence of negative conditions and the psychological perspective defines well-being as the prevalence of positive attributes. "Positive psychology at the subjective level is about valued subjective experiences" (McNulty, 2012). Well-being is an important factor in this subjective experience, as well as, contentment, satisfaction of the past, optimism for the future and happiness in the present. Psychological well-being refers to how people evaluate their lives (Diener, 1997).

Recent studies in the topic of humour suggested strong evidence of humour being correlated, effected by or influencing various aspects in psychology and well-being. Humour is correlated with good self-efficacy and resilience. Humour has shown to improve and help the aging process. Humour can also help aging individuals maintain a sense of satisfaction in their lives. Humour exerted greater anxiety-lowering effect than exercise (Szabo, 2003). Humour has evolved in humans as a universal mode of communication and social influence with a variety of functions. Both humour and religion are associated with transcendence, and that this maybe a helpful a conceptual bridge linking the two. (Joanna Collicutt & Amanda Gray, 2012). The impact of a structured humorous activity on the psychological wellbeing of older people in residential settings revealed that residents (older adults) who participated in the humorous activity were found to have significantly reduced levels of anxiety and depression, when compared to residents who received no intervention. (D.M.houston, K.J.Mckee, L.Caroll & H.Marsh, 1998). Humour skills programmes are believed to assist in improving emotional well-being by increasing self-efficacy, positive thinking, optimism and perceptions of control, while decreasing negative thinking, perceptions of stress, depression, anxiety and stress. (Shelley.A Crawford & Nerina J.Caltabiano, 2011).

It is easy to claim that possessing sense of humour is now a day's deemed desirable. If a person is said not to possess sense of humour, this means more than that they might be a boring company and lack a vital human quality. Therefore the importance of humour in life is worth considering. The link between sense of humour and psychological well-being in the context of the present generation both young as well as middle adults is a notable area of study. As young adults begin to explore and establish a life structure on their own and middle adults have spent a considerable time living the explored life structure. The difference in humour styles used by these two groups is also valued. Hence this study aims to provide useful for adoption of context specific and general humour style and constructive use of humour in attaining psychologically well-being. Therefore the objectives are:

1.1. Objectives

1. To study the Humour styles and situational humour responses among young and middle adults.
2. To study the level of psychological wellbeing among young and middle adults.
3. To study the difference in humour styles, situational humour response and psychological well-being between young and middle adults.
4. To study the relationship between situational humour response and Psychological well-being among adults.
5. To study the relationship between humour styles and dimensions of well-being among adults.
6. To study the difference in demographic variables like gender, occupation, native language, and religion in the styles of humour employed by young and middle adults.

2. Methodology

2.1. Hypotheses

- Hypothesis 1: There will be significant relationship between situational humour response and six dimensions of psychological well-being in adults.
- Hypothesis 2: There will be significant relationship between humour styles and the dimension of well-being among adults.
- Hypothesis 3: There will be no significant difference in humour styles between young and middle adults.
- Hypothesis 4: There will be no significant difference in situational humour response between young and middle adults.
- Hypothesis 5: There will be no significant difference in psychological well-being between young and middle adults.
- Hypothesis 6: There will be no significant difference in humour style between male and female.
- Hypothesis 7: There will be no significant difference in humour style between employed and unemployed adults.

2.2. Sample

The target group for the study was chosen by purposive sampling method. The sample size involved 108 middle adults. 62 ranging within the age group of 20-30 years in young adults and 45 ranging within the age group of 40-50 years in middle adults. The sample was obtained from both the gender as well as from different linguistic, cultural and occupational backgrounds.

2.3. Research Design

The present study adopted Expost-facto research design.

2.4. Tools

The following tools were used for administering the samples: (a) Humour styles questionnaire (Martin & Doris, 2003), (b) Situational humour response questionnaire (Martin & Lefcourt, 1996), (c) Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scales (PWB)

2.4.1. Humour Styles Questionnaire (Martin & Doris, 2003)

The HSQ consists of 32 items, each of which is a self-descriptive statement about particular uses of humour. Respondents rate the degree to which each statement describes them on a scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree). Scores are obtained for 4 subscales relating to potentially beneficial and detrimental ways people typically make use of humour in their everyday lives. 32 items (8 for each subscale) measuring Four humour styles: Affiliative (use of humour to amuse others and facilitate relationships) Self-enhancing (use of humour to cope with stress and maintain a humorous outlook during times of difficulty) Aggressive (use of sarcastic, manipulative, put-down, or disparaging humour) Self-defeating (use of humour for excessive self-disparagement, ingratiation, or defensive denial)

2.4.2. Situational Humour Response Questionnaire (Martin & Lefcourt, 1996)

The SHRQ consists of 21 items. The first 18 items each contain a brief description of an ordinary life situation. Respondents are asked to indicate the degree to which they would typically laugh if they were in that situation, using a scale from 1 ("I would not have been particularly amused") to 5 ("I would have laughed heartily"). The last 3 items ask about the overall degree to which the respondent is easily amused and laughs in a wide range of situations.

2.4.3. Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scales (PWB)

Consist of a series of statements reflecting the six areas of psychological well-being: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. Respondents rate statements on a scale of 1 to 6, with 1 indicating strong disagreement and 6 indicating strong agreement.

2.5. Procedure

The data collection was conducted in two ways. Questionnaires were administered to the samples by both printed and online survey forms. The confidentiality of the personal details and information for the research obtained was maintained. The respondents were chosen from student groups, working population and housewives in the friends, family and acquainted circles. The respondents wilfully completed the questionnaires and the data collection process was completed within 15 days.

2.6. Statistical Analysis

SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) software package (windows version 16.0) was used to analyze the data. Descriptive statistics was used to analyze the baseline data and Pearson product moment correlation and Independent sample t-test was done to determine any significant gender differences.

3. Results and Discussion

Sample Character	Mean	Standard Deviation
Age	32.14	11.8

Table 1: Mean age of the sample

The above table shows that the mean age of the sample is 32.14 years and the standard deviation of the sample is 11.8. The majority of the sample lies under the age of 32 years.

Sample Character	Gender		Occupation		
	Male	Female	Student	Housewives	Working
Frequency	71	37	47	12	49
Percentage	65.1	33.9	43.1	11.0	45.0

Table 2: Sample Characteristics

The above table shows the characteristics of the sample. There are 71 males constituting 65.1% and 37 females constituting 33.9% of the sample. The sample varied in occupation with 47 students, 12 housewives under the unemployed category and 49 working members under the employed category.

Sample Character	Native Language						
	Tamil	Telugu	Marathi	Urdu	Kannada	Malayalam	Other
Frequency	60	15	11	3	7	9	3
Percentage	55.6	13.9	10.2	2.8	6.5	8.3	2.8

Table 3: Sample Characteristics

The above table indicates the sample characteristics of native language. The samples belonged to different regions with different languages out of which the majority were Tamil speaking (60) followed by Telugu (15), Marathi (11), Urdu (3), Kannada (7), Malayalam (9), Other languages (3).

Sample Character	Religion			
	Hindu	Muslim	Christian	Others
Frequency	89	8	10	1
Percentage	81.7	7.3	9.2	0.9

Table 4: Sample Characteristics

The table shows the sample characteristic of religion. The participants were chosen from the major three religions namely Hindus (89) constituting 81.7%, Muslims (8) constituting 7.3%, Christians (10) constituting 9.2% and 1 member not belonging to any religion.

Variables	Autonomy	Environmental master	Personal growth	Positive relations	Purpose in life	Self acceptance
Situational humour response	0.41	0.195*	0.052	0.114	0.030	0.085

Table 5: Relationship between Situational humour response and psychological wellbeing
*($p > 0.05$ level)

The table indicates the relationship between the variables Situational Humour Response and the six dimensions of psychological well-being namely Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Personal Growth, Positive Relations, and Purpose in life and Self-acceptance in both young and middle adults. The variable situational humour response bears no significant relationship with the six dimensions of well-being except Environmental Mastery (0.195) at 0.05 level of significance. Therefore the hypothesis 1 is partially accepted. There is a significant relationship between situational humour response and environmental mastery in adults.

- Discussion: The situational humour response is one of the ways in which an individual perceives a Situation to be humorous and tries to cope with difficult situations by the use of humour. It tends to be correlated with Environmental mastery (a dimension of psychological well-being) as it means possessing a sense of competence in managing the environment, being in charge of the situations, effective use of external situations and opportunities according to his/her needs and values. Therefore these two go hand in hand (situation and environment) to enable adults to have good psychological well-being in the context of external environment. The other dimensions of psychological well-being is not related to situational humour as situation is understood in the context of external factors and not internal factors like personal growth, self-acceptance, purpose in life etc.

Variables	Autonomy	Environmental mastery	Personal growth	Positive relations	Purpose in life	Self acceptance
Affiliative	0.184	0.444**	0.446**	0.488**	0.154	0.475**
Self-enhancing	0.011	0.127	0.068	0.127	0.083	0.088
Aggressive	-0.095	-0.170	-0.322**	-0.339**	-0.372**	-0.249**
Self-defeating	-0.139	0.095	-0.236*	-0.163	-0.201*	-0.078

Table 6: Relationship between Humour styles and psychological well-being

**(p>0.01 level)

*(p>0.05 level)

The above table shows the correlation between the different humour styles (Affiliative, Self-enhancing, Aggressive, Self-defeating) and dimensions of psychological well-being (Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Personal Growth, Positive Relations, Purpose in life and Self-acceptance) at various significant levels in both young and middle adults. The Affiliative humour style is found to be positively correlated with Environmental Mastery (0.444), Personal growth (0.446), Positive Relations (0.488) and self-acceptance (0.475) at 0.01 level of significance. Self-enhancing humour style is not correlated with any of the dimensions whereas Aggressive humour style is negatively correlated with personal growth (-0.322), Positive relations (-0.399), purpose in life (-0.372), Self-acceptance (-0.249) at 0.01 level of significance. Self-defeating humour style is negatively correlated with personal growth (-0.236) and (-0.201) at 0.05 level of significance. Therefore the Hypothesis 2 is partially accepted. There is a significant relationship between humour styles and dimensions of psychological well-being in adults.

- Discussion: An affiliative humour style tends to be strongly correlated with positive relations, environmental mastery, self-acceptance and personal growth. In order to associate with people better adults use Affiliative humour style to earn positive relations (good intimacy, satisfying trusting relationships) and stay in charge of the environment. This would probably be due the urge of achieving self-acceptance and increasing personality development.

Aggressive humour style is negatively correlated with positive relations as use of this humour style would deteriorate the quality of the relationship individuals have with others leading to isolated and frustrated interpersonal relationships which would further impact self-acceptance and personal growth. It bears negative correlation with purpose in life because individuals high in use of aggressive humour lack sense of meaning in life and is aimless is not sensitive to others.

Self-defeating humour style is negatively correlated with personal growth as people low in personal growth have a sense of personal stagnation, have low self-esteem and is trying to earn others recognition at the cost of making fool of themselves. Therefore it serves as a hurdle in personality development and further not set any purpose in life.

Self-enhancing humour style is not correlated with any of the dimension or well-being as people high in use of this style are still in the path of establishing good, correct sense of humour which will enhance the overall psychological well-being of adults.

Variables	Group	Number	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error	t-value	Level of significance
Affiliative	MA	45	39.2	7	1.4	3.705	0.000**
	YA	63	34	7			
Self-enhancing	MA	45	38.8	7	0.6	0,09	0.93NS
	YA	63	38.2	7			
Aggressive	MA	45	23.2	8	1.2	3.8	0.000**
	YA	63	27.8	5			
Self-defeating	MA	45	26.4	9	1.6	0.28	0.78
	YA	63	26.8	8			
Situational humour response	MA	45	58.3	9	1.7	0.02	0.98
	YA	63	58.2	9			
Autonomy	MA	45	29.1	6	1.1	0.6	0.55
	YA	63	28.4	5			
Environmental mastery	MA	45	29.7	4	0.7	3.4	0.001*
	YA	63	27.1	4			
Personal growth	MA	45	33.2	4	0.9	3.5	0.001*
	YA	63	29.9	5			
Positive relation	MA	45	35.8	5	1	6.2	0.000*
	YA	63	29.6	5			
Purpose in life	MA	45	31.8	5	1	2.4	0.02*
	YA	63	29.5	5			
Self acceptance	MA	45	33.3	5	1	5.1	0.000*
	YA	63	28.3	5			

Table 7: Shows group differences in Humour style, situational humour response and psychological well-being between middle and young adults.

**(p>0.01 level)

*(p>0.05 level)

The above table shows the differences between young and middle adults in the variables and its various dimensions. There is a significant difference in Affiliative humour style and Aggressive humour style between young and middle adults (3.705) and (3.8) respectively at 0.01 level of significance. There is no significant difference in self-enhancing (0.09) and self-defeating (0.28) humour style between young and middle adults. Similarly there is no significant difference in Situational humour response between young and middle adults (0.02). There is no significant difference in Autonomy (0.06) between young and middle adults. There is a significant difference between young and middle adults in the dimensions of well-being namely: Environmental Mastery (3.4); Personal Growth (3.5); Positive relations (6.2); purpose in life (2.4); Self-acceptance (5.1) at 0.05 level of significance. Therefore the hypothesis 3 is partially rejected, hypothesis 4 is rejected & hypothesis 5 is partially rejected. There is a significant difference in humour styles (Affiliative & Aggressive) and dimensions of well-being (Environmental Mastery, Personal Growth, and Positive Relations, Purpose in life and Self-acceptance) between young and middle adults.

- Discussion: There is a difference in the use of affiliative and aggressive humour style between young and middle adults. Young adults score high in aggressive humour whereas middle adults score high in affiliative humour. This difference is assumed due to the years of experience gained by middle adults in the establishment of suitable life structures. Middle adults have grown to accept people and are exposed to the negative effects of possessing aggressive humour which is less appealing and lead to the adoption of affiliative humour in later years. In contrary the young adult are not mature enough to be sensitive towards others and is less aware of the ineffectiveness of aggressive humour in the long run.

There is no difference in situational humour response as it depends on how every individual perceive a situation and there would not be much of a difference in people's perception as it comes under the age group of adults on the whole.

In the dimensions of well-being middle adults score higher in all the dimensions except autonomy. This difference is possibly because middle adults have lived considerable longer years and formed good psychological well-being with the help of better coping strategies devised on the basis of huge experience, exposure to various situations and maturity. Middle adults at this point of life are in a position to control complex array of external activities. They have feeling of continued development, see self as growing and expanding, is open to new experiences and see improvement in self and behaviour over time. Middle adults are also high in maintaining positive relations as they have had more opportunities to interact with people and learn the effective ways in dealing with relationships and maintaining good interpersonal skills. This could be one of the reasons why they adopt affiliative humour style in comparison with young adults who use more of aggressive humour. They have set goals in life and feel there is meaning to present and past life, hold beliefs that give life a purpose and value have a particular learnt way of living. The middle adults have scored the highest in self-acceptance as they possess a positive attitude toward the self, acknowledge and accept multiple aspects of self, including good and bad qualities; feels positive about past life over the years. They have learnt to accept one and life as it is which the starking difference between young and middle adults.

Variables	Group	Numbers	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error	t-value	Level of significance
Affiliative	Male	71	36.2	8.1	1.5	0.06	0.9
	Female	37	36.2	6.4			
Self-enhancing	Male	71	35.3	7.1	7.5	1.2	0.25
	Female	37	44.4	8.3			
Aggressive	Male	71	27.1	6.4	1.3	2.7**	0.01
	Female	37	23.7	6.1			
Self-defeating	Male	71	27.8	7.9	1.6	2.1*	0.05
	Female	37	24.4	8.2			

Table 8: Difference in humour styles between male and female

**($p > 0.01$ level)

*($p > 0.05$ level)

The above table shows the difference in humour styles between male and female. There is significant difference in aggressive humour style (2.7) at 0.01 level and self-defeating humour style (2.1) at 0.05 level. There is no significant difference in affiliative and self-enhancing humour style. Therefore hypothesis 6 is partially rejected. There is a significant difference in aggressive and self-defeating humour style between male and female.

- Discussion: Male score higher in aggressive humour style which could be due to patriarchal society where male gender is dominant this could be one reason why they engage in teasing (putting down others) which is a form of aggressive humour style. Male also perceive growth in individualistic manner whereas women see their growth and well-being by associating with others therefore male seem to be less sensitive towards others feelings. Male also score higher in self-defeating humour which could possibly be due to lack of self-esteem and self-love relatively in comparison with female.

Variables	Group	Numbers	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error	t-value	Level of significance
Affiliative	Unemployed	54	34.8	7.8	1.4	2.1*	0.05
	Employed	54	37.7	6.9			
Self-enhancing	Unemployed	54	40.1	5.2	7.1	0.5	0.6
	Employed	54	38.7	7.5			
Aggressive	Unemployed	54	26.2	5.9	1.3	0.5	0.6
	Employed	54	25.6	7.1			
Self-defeating	Unemployed	54	25.8	7.3	1.6	1.1	0.3
	Employed	54	27.6	8.8			

Table 9: Difference in humour styles between Unemployed and employed adults
*($p > 0.05$ level)

The above table shows the difference in humour styles between unemployed and employed adults. There is a significant difference in affiliative humour style (2.1) at 0.05 levels. There is no significant difference in self-enhancing, aggressive and self-defeating humour style. Therefore the hypothesis 7 is partially rejected. There is significant difference in affiliative humour style between unemployed and employed adults.

- Discussion: Unemployed adults use less of affiliative humour style than employed adults because they are not under the compulsion to please others which is an expected criterion in a professional environment. For Example housewives who are not in constant touch with the outer world do not have the need to use affiliative humour. They tend to engage more in other styles of humour. When in workplace environment adults have the necessity to behave professionally and be sensitive in handling relationships. Therefore the use of affiliative humour style is more among employed adults.

4. Conclusion

On the whole it is established that there is a significant relationship between situational humour response and environmental mastery in adults. There is a significant partial relationship between humour styles and dimensions of psychological well-being in adults. There is a significant difference in humour styles (Affiliative & Aggressive) and dimensions of well-being (Environmental Mastery, Personal Growth, and Positive Relations, Purpose in life and Self-acceptance) between young and middle adults. There is a significant difference in aggressive and self-defeating humour style between male and female. There is significant difference in affiliative humour style between unemployed and employed adults.

5. Implication

This study serves the purpose of bringing the importance of sense of humour into limelight which was often neglected in the field of research. It helps individuals to become aware of the sense of humour they possess which is seldom noticed. And to adopt the effective style of humour in accordance with varying situational demands. The study elucidates the importance of having good psychological well-being for the overall personal development and well-being. It provides scope for improving adults' sense of humour and well-being in relation to each other.

6. Limitation

The sample for the study is obtained from a less culturally varied background. Therefore accounting for language, religion, culture etc was not optimally realised. The sample could not be used as representative of the target population. The sample is unequally distributed across demographic variables.

7. Suggestion for Future Study

It is suggested that future researches be conducted with multicultural sample in order to find the difference in humour style across various cultures.

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