Development of an Objective Humour Appreciation Measure (HAM)

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Abstract of Paper: A Sense of Humour (SOH) is considered a highly desirable human characteristic. It has attracted scholarly enquiry in many disciplines including communication, education, linguistics, literature, medicine, philosophy and psychology for centuries. Attempts have been made by researchers, although more in the field of psychology, to develop a reliable instrument to assess one's sense of humour. As a result, a number of Sense of Humour (SOH) psychometric measurement scales have emerged. On the other hand, these scales tend to focus more on people's attitudes towards humour and their perceptions of themselves through self reports. Reliable and rigorous as they may be, there arise questions of objectivity. It is under such circumstances that I embarked on an exploratory research study to develop an additional measurement scale that would objectively assess people's appreciation of three types of visual and written humour, namely those related to aggression, sex, and double meaning. In this paper presentation, I will give a brief review of current measures of Sense of Humour. Then, I will detail the process of developing the above objective measurement scale and report on the reliability and validity analyses of it. Finally, I will discuss some implications and applications of this measurement scale in the educational context.

(203 words)

Introduction

Purpose statement:

This paper seeks to report the process of developing an objective humour appreciation measure (HAM) with the following aspects covered:

1) An Overview of Current Measures of Sense of Humour (SOH)
2) Developmental Stages of HAM
3) Reliability and Validity of HAM
4) Possible Implications and Applications of HAM

Definitions:

As defined by the BBC English dictionary, humour is "the ability to see when something is funny and to say amusing things" (p. 528). In the Encyclopaedia Britannica, humour is a "type of stimulation that tends to elicit the laughter reflex". The American heritage dictionary defines humour as "the ability to perceive, enjoy, or express what is amusing or comical" (p.408). The Webster's unabridged dictionary of the English language describes humour as "the faculty of perceiving what is amusing and comical and "the faculty of expressing the amusing and comical" (p. 932). For the purpose of this research, humour is defined as the ability to understand, enjoy, and express what is amusing.
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1) An Overview of Current Measures of Sense of Humour (SOH)

A Sense of Humour (SOH) is considered a highly desirable human characteristic. It has attracted scholarly enquiry in many disciplines including communication, education, linguistics, literature, medicine, philosophy and psychology for centuries. Attempts have been made by researchers, although more in the field of psychology, to develop a reliable instrument to assess one's sense of humour. As a result, a number of SOH psychometric measurement scales have emerged.

Herzog and Bush (1994) reported their measures of one's sense of humour and humour appreciation in their article, The prediction of preference for sick humor. McGhee (1994, 1996)’s SOH measurement included the following additional aspects: enjoyment of humour, seriousness and the negative mood, playfulness of the positive mood, laughter, verbal humour, finding humour in everyday life, laughing at your self, humour under stress. Svebak (1974, 1994) measured traits of sensitivity to meta-message of humour, personal liking of humour, emotional expressiveness, and SOH. A further development is the evolvement of a Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale (MSHS) by Thorson and Powell (1993, 1997). Through a factorial design, they refined their measure of SOH to include the following aspects: a) recognition of oneself as a humorous person, b) recognition of other’s humour, c) appreciation of humour, d) laughing, e) perspective (outlook on life), and, f) coping humour. In a word, the study of SOH has progressed from focusing on a one-dimensional scale that measures one’s propensity to laugh as in Martin and Lefcourt (1984) measure of the tendency to smile and laugh in a variety of situations towards a multidimensional scale that includes other aspects of humour.

Reliable and rigorous as these multidimensional scales are, they tend to focus more on people's attitudes towards humour and their perceptions of themselves through self reports. Consequently, there arise questions of objectivity. It is under such circumstances that I embarked on an exploratory research study to develop an additional measurement scale that would objectively assess people's appreciation of visual and written humour related to aggression, sex, and double meaning.

2) Developmental Stages Related to HAM

The development of an objective Humour Appreciation Measure (HAM) has gone through the following stages: a) construction of framework, b) comprehensive review of literature, c) compilation of materials, d) construction of the scale, e) pilot-testing, f) revising and modifying, g) expert review, h) fine-tuning and refining, i) administering, and j) data analyzes.

In constructing the research framework, the mode of data collection was considered. Working within the time and resources constraints, this researcher adopted a community-distributed questionnaire survey method with the participant group limited to university affiliates. After a comprehensive review of literature, this researcher decided on modeling the survey construct after Eysenck’s sense of humour measurement scale as found in his book Know your personality (1975) and began the compilation of materials. Through a 4-month compilation and selection, this researcher constructed a preliminary measure with 10 commercially syndicated cartoon-type jokes in October 2003. However, the measure was eventually abandoned after a long wait on the delayed decision of refusal by the copyright holder in granting copyright permission.

Afterwards, this researcher decided to begin another round of compilation of materials with an intent to avoid syndicated cartoon-type jokes. As a result of the efforts, another measurement scale that contained 25 written and 25 cartoon-type jokes was formulated. Through a small sample of 12 participants, the measure was pre-pilot-tested to check for the clarity in language and against possible pitfalls such as ambiguity and participant fatigue. Through revising and modifying, the measure was adapted and sent for expert review by 2 registered psychologists: this researcher’s supervisor at Monash University and an unofficial mentor (critical friend) in The University of Melbourne. Incorporating the suggestions of feedback and comments, this researcher finalized the preliminary measure and prepared for mass quantity of printed copies. The measure was then administered to over 400 adults in the Metropolitan area of Melbourne. As a result of the 12-week data collection (from 21 April 2004 to 14 July 2004), 410 usable responses were collected out of a total of 430 received responses. 20 responses were discarded as they were largely incomplete.
3) Reliability and Validity of HAM

The objective Humour Appreciation Measure (HAM) is a written self-report questionnaire of opinion towards 50 jokes (25 written and 25 cartoon-type jokes). Participants were asked to rate the jokes on a Likert 5-point scale ranging from one to five, with one being “not at all funny”, two “not very funny”, three “neutral”, four “quite funny” and five “very funny”. Participants also had to identify whether the main humour element in the joke was aggression, sex-connotation and/or double meaning. While the data were collected anonymously, demographic data questions were included to estimate the diverse backgrounds of the participants in terms of gender, age range, nationality, occupation, first language, dominance of hand (left-handed versus right-handed) and religious belief. Such information was solicited to ensure the data collected were representative across groups. It was used in the process of pilot-testing and statistical refinement for the final battery—principal component analyses, internal reliability, rank ordering and discarding items.

The internal consistency reliability coefficient was obtained using a computer statistical software program, SPSS for Windows Version 11.5. The results were used to estimate the degree where different parts of the measure are measuring the same variable. The alpha of the 50 items of jokes was 0.9211. When the measure was streamlined to 30 and 20 items, the alpha was reduced to 0.8614 and 0.8174 respectively. Various concepts related to validity were also looked at (Kline, 2000). Although there is no logical relationship between face and real validity, the face validity of HAM was stratified by making the questions sensible, engaging, and easy to follow. The consistency of the format and easy-to-follow layout of the questionnaire booklet, together with a separate score sheet appeared to support the face validity of what it was intended to measure, i.e. opinions about the funniness level of each joke. As a voluntary questionnaire, the measure did not explicitly state the relationship of funniness ratings and humour appreciation (the higher the score a person achieved, the higher appreciation of humour she or he had). It avoided possible social desirable confounding factors that might influence participants to be guided to amplify or fake their responses.

Since there is not an established benchmark test for humour appreciation, the concurrent validity of HAM is not available. Humour appreciation is one of the many aspects of an SOH. It is very different from the vast number of studies that look at the predictive validity of intelligence tests and academic success. Therefore, the predictive validity is not applicable. However, attempts will be made in a later study to look at the correlation of HAM and an established SOH scale—MSHS (1993). In an effort to attain content validity, expert opinions were sought and focused pre-pilot tests were administered before the preliminary measure pilot-tested.

Regarding the incremental validity of HAM, a future larger scale study (N ≥ 1,000) using the refined measure of 20 items of jokes will explore the correlation of each item with the total test scores (total scores of funniness ratings) and item individuals. It will also look at the differential validity to check whether the total test scores will correlate with the humour appreciation sub score in MSHS (1993). Finally, the construct validity of HAM was established by a factor analysis where the rotated component matrix extracted a clear-cut 2-component structure (cartoon-type jokes on component 1 and written jokes on component 2) with 27.24% of cumulative initial eigenvalues explained in the total variance explained. With regard to the construct validity, a content analysis of 11 identified jokes was done to check with the participants’ perceptions in terms of the presence of aggression, sex-connotation, and double meaning in the joke. The results of these selected jokes were consistent, supporting the notion that the measure was measuring what it intended, i.e., aggression, and sex-connotation. In addition, this measure was found to have strong discriminatory power, i.e., a wide spread of scores. Although the measure has not met the criteria for concurrent, predictive, and differential validity at this initial stage, the construct validity is found adequate through rigorous proper hypothesis testing, content analysis, and inferential statistical analyses.

4) Possible Implications and Applications of HAM

There are several possible implications in the higher education context as revealed in this study of which a high percentage of participants (56.4 %) were university students. A review of literature reveals that the use of humour has decreased anxiety level and boredom in classrooms, increased interest, heightened cultural and
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In light of learner-centered teaching, teachers should explore the possibility of incorporating humour (jokes) in their classrooms. HAM, in this context, could be considered as a potential initial screening tool to estimate the diversity of the group in terms of humour (joke) appreciation. The screening results will have an impact on the curriculum development and instructional methods. One cautionary note is that the use of humour in the classroom is not a “quick-fix”. Simply adding humour (jokes) into the curriculum does not guarantee accelerated or optimal learning. Negotiation between the curriculum and student needs will need to take place, having taken careful consideration of the learners’ motivation in the classroom. Teachers should be aware that if learners have a negative attitude toward learning a subject matter, the negative attitude will have to be dealt with. Learners need both external and internal motivation. Optimum learning takes root only when learners realize that what they are learning is relevant to their needs.

Contemporary classrooms stress the vitality of sensitivity of teachers to the cultural specific elements of certain materials, respecting learners' individual self that includes their religion, culture, value, and belief system. This sensitivity is particularly required in today’s’ multi-cultured and multi-lingual classrooms. Since HAM was constructed with an international perspective, it has the potential of a culturally-fair humour appreciation measure upon full validation through subsequent studies. On the other hand, the appropriate use of humour (jokes) from different cultures and/or groups could also be good tools to raise the cultural awareness level of the learners, drawing learners from different backgrounds closer and together in cultural awareness workshops and classes.

From a learner’s perspective, HAM could be used as a complementary objective validation tool to existing SOH scales. It is worth repeating that existing SOH measures tend to focus more on people's attitudes towards humour and their perceptions of themselves through self reports. Consequently, there arise questions of objectivity. HAM, in this aspect, could be a “reality check” that supplements existing SOH measures. In addition, because HAM has been constructed specifically to contain three specific humorous elements (aggression, sex-connotation, and double meaning), learners could self-analyze through the measure to explore if they have a preferred type of humour.

Conclusion

This is a preliminary study with a sampling size of 410 responses, in which female responses (67.6%) outweigh the males’ (32.4%). Most of the respondents were adults from Monash University and they were predominantly students. The data collection was primarily based on a written questionnaire with little provision for free expression of unanticipated responses. Because of all these, one may question the validity and reliability of the data, hence casting doubts on the possible implications and applications.

On balancing the strengths and weaknesses, this study was warranted. First, this small-scale preliminary study was done as an exploratory study with a view to develop a clear and focused objective humour appreciation measure. Owing to the academic backgrounds and interest of this researcher, HAM was formulated from an international perspective with Hong Kong Chinese, Australian, and North American adult participants in mind. Since humour is a complex and elusive subject under the grand umbrella of culture, it was not this researcher's intention to attempt making conclusive statements about the universally acceptability and applicability of HAM. Instead, this study was meant to stimulate discussion and inspire similar research ventures on this complex but not satisfactorily or actively investigated area. This researcher believes there is much room for further research in an attempt to fill the noticeable gap between humour appreciation in real social settings and self-reported attitudinal assessment of SOH.
References


