Humour, Personality and Social Adjustment:
A Preliminary Report on a Correlation Study

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Abstract of Paper: This research is a preliminary correlation study in investigating the relations between humour appreciation, sense of humour, personality, and social adjustment of adults in Australia, Hong Kong, and USA. Although there is some literature related to sense of humour, personality, and social adjustment, empirical studies have been scant. Likewise, there has been no study studying Australian adults. It is under these circumstances that I embarked on this research study to examine links between sense of humour and humour appreciation across age, sex, culture, personality traits, and social adjustment. In conducting this study, I had developed an objective Humour Appreciation Measure (HAM) that was to be used in conjunction with existing validated measures of sense of humour, personality traits, psychological well-being, and social adjustment. However, due to technical difficulties, there has been a delay in the data collection of the correlation study. Consequently, only the preliminary results of HAM are available. In this paper presentation, I will give an overview of the background of the study. Then, I will discuss the properties as well as the preliminary statistical results of HAM. Finally, I will highlight some implications of this study in the educational context. (193 words)

Introduction

Purpose statement:
This paper seeks to report the preliminary results of an exploratory study into the relationship of humour, personality and social adjustment in the following sections:
1) Background of the study
2) Properties of HAM
3) Preliminary results of an objective Humour Appreciation Measure (HAM)
3) Possible implications of the study

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 *Encyclopædia 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 encyclopedia 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.
1) Background of the Study

This research is a cross-cultural correlation study. It aims to investigate the relations between humour appreciation, sense of humour, personality, and social adjustment of adults in Victoria (Australasia), Hong Kong (East Asia), and (United States of America) North America.

Previous and recent research studies indicate that there are links between sense of humour, personality and psychological well-being. For instance, Kambouropoulou (1930) found in her study that extraverted participants preferred superiority humour. Eysenck (1942) reported that extraverted respondents preferred sexual and simple jokes, while introverts preferred complex and non-sexual jokes. More recently, Cann and Calhoun (2001) observed that individuals described as being "well above average" in sense of humour scored lower on measures of neuroticism and higher in agreeableness respectively.

In the affective domain, humour has been associated with social adjustment and psychological well-being. Mannell and McMahon (1982) revealed in their study that increases in positive moods and decreases in negative moods were associated significantly with greater numbers of incidents of humour and overt laughter. More recently, Thorson, Powell, Sarmany-Schuller, and Hampes (1997), using a validated multidimensional sense of humour scale in their study, observed that higher scores in the scale were related positively to factors associated with psychological health, such as optimism and self esteem, and negatively with signs of psychological distress such as depression. Another study by Kuiper and Martin (1998) also reported a positive correlation between coping humour and self-esteem. The findings were consistent with their previous studies (Kuiper and Martin, 1993; Martin, 1996)

Although there is some literature related to sense of humour, personality, and social adjustment, empirical studies have been scant. No study has simultaneously investigated relations between humour appreciation, sense of humour, personality and social adjustment. Likewise, there has been no study comparing Australian, American and Chinese adults. It was under these circumstances that this researcher embarked on this research study. In conducting this study, this researcher has developed an objective Humour Appreciation Measure (HAM) to be used in conjunction with existing validated measures of sense of humour, personality traits, psychological well-being, and social adjustment. Survey results will be analysed principally by analyses of variance, factor analysis and correlational techniques within and across the 3 regions’ samples.

2) Properties of HAM

This research study began in July 2002 with the first year being spent on conducting a comprehensive literature review, applying for human research ethics clearance, and drafting a detailed research proposal and for the study. In June 2003, the study was formally approved and accepted as a Ph.D. candidature research. This researcher started compiling materials for the survey. After two small-scale pre-pilot studies and modifying the materials, the first version of the survey was taking shape. It was then administered to a small group (N=12) of colleagues and university students in Melbourne, Australia to gather feedback on the clarity of instructions and the face validity of the research constructs. The survey instrument was further fine-tuned to its final form in the pilot study and administered to over 400 adults through a community sampling method via colleagues and friends at Monash University, Australia. The data collection lasted for 12 weeks, from 21 April 2004 to 14 July 2004.

All participants were given an explanatory statement as well as an informed consent form, together with the survey booklet and a score sheet. All participation was voluntary and anonymous. They were asked to score 25 written and 25 cartoon-type jokes on a scale ranging from 1-5, with 1 being ‘not at all funny’ and 5 ‘very funny’. They also had to identify whether the main humour element in the jokes was aggression, sex-connotation and/or double meaning, and provide demographic data about factors such as gender, age and nationality.
The following lists the summarized descriptive statistics of the demographic data: (Total number/Percentage)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender:</th>
<th>Males (133 or 32.4%)</th>
<th>Females (277 or 67.6%)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age:</td>
<td>18-24 (105 or 25.6%)</td>
<td>25-34 (121 or 29.5%)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>35-44 (85 or 20.7%)</td>
<td>45-54 and above (99 or 24.2%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nationality:</td>
<td>Australian (283 or 69%)</td>
<td>Chinese (35 or 8.5%)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Others (92 or 22.5%)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Occupation:</td>
<td>Student (229 or 55.9%)</td>
<td>University staff (110 or 26.8%)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Others (71 or 17.3%)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1st Language:</td>
<td>English (318 or 77.6%)</td>
<td>Chinese (33 or 8.0%)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Others (59 or 14.4%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Religious Belief:</td>
<td>Yes (214 or 52.2%)</td>
<td>No (191 or 46.6%)</td>
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<td>Unknown (5 or 1.2%)</td>
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The majority of participants were Australian adults. There were also participants from other countries and various walks of life. Statistical techniques such as principal component analyses, internal reliability, rank ordering and discarding items were used to check the internal consistency and reliability of the data collected.

3) Preliminary results of an objective Humour Appreciation Measure (HAM)

The preliminary findings show some notable differences in individual humour appreciation linked to gender and nationality in the samples surveyed. The statistics show a markedly significant difference in the following three comparisons. First, males tended to appreciate written jokes more than women. Second, males tended to appreciate jokes (cartoon-type and written) with sex connotations more than females. Third, Chinese and non–English speaking background participants tended to appreciate written jokes more than Australians. The following tables a summary of the inferential statistics.

1. **Preliminary Findings (T-Test Results)** *Statistically significant, P value = < 0.05*

(Mean out of a possible score of 125 (cartoons/jokes) and 250 (cartoons & jokes))

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male vs. Female</th>
<th>Australian vs Chinese</th>
<th>Religious vs Non-religious</th>
<th>Left-handed vs Right-handed</th>
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<tr>
<td>A.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appreciation of cartoons:</td>
<td>Male (80.8968) &gt; Female (79.6292)</td>
<td>Chinese (81.3143) &gt; Australian (79.8456)</td>
<td>Right-handed (80.3042) &gt; Left-handed (77.3784)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Appreciation of written jokes:</td>
<td>Male (83.6899) &gt; Female (80.2256)</td>
<td>Chinese (88.3529) &gt; Australian (79.5511)</td>
<td>Right-handed (81.3593) &gt; Left-handed (81.0000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appreciation of cartoons &amp; jokes:</td>
<td>Male (164.3333) &gt; Female (160.0467)</td>
<td>Chinese (169.5588) &gt; Australian (159.4432)</td>
<td>Right-handed (161.7442) &gt; Left-handed (157.9714)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
E. English vs Chinese (First Language)

- Appreciation of cartoons: Chinese (81.3571) > English (79.8477)
- Appreciation of written jokes: Chinese (88.1111) > English (80.1368)*
- Appreciation of cartoons & jokes: Chinese (169.3333) > English (160.0171)*

F. English vs Non-English (First Language)

- Appreciation of cartoons: Non-English (80.2472) > English (79.8477)
- Appreciation of written jokes: Non-English (85.3837) > English (80.1368)*
- Appreciation of cartoons & jokes: Non-English (165.5412) > English (160.0171)*

2. Preliminary Findings (T-Test Results) *Statistically significant, P value = < 0.05) (Mean out of a possible score of 25 (sex) and 30 (incongruity)

A. Male vs Female

- Appreciation of items with sex: Male (18.3182) > Female (17.3905)*
- Appreciation of items with incongruity: Male (20.8571) > Female (20.6630)

4) Possible Implications of the Study

If these above preliminary findings are consistent with the findings of a larger-scale main study that is in the process of launching, there are several implications for education that are worth noticing. First, the finding that males tended to appreciate written humour more than females in the study differs from the common belief that males are in general not as imaginative with words and written text as females. Further study will be warranted in studying the difference in reading behaviour between males and females in written humour appreciation. Second, related to the second finding about sex-connotation humour, care should be taken in making reference to such humour in an educational setting because they are more likely to be regarded as unwanted by female students. Third, related to the finding that non-English speaking background participants tended to appreciate written jokes more than Australians, this is also a new finding that people using English as a second language do not necessarily have language/cultural barriers. Jokes, given the right context, can be appreciated by a different language user group. If this is true, language teachers in multi-cultural/lingual classrooms should feel encouraged to use English written jokes in their classrooms.

Conclusion

This is a preliminary study with a modest community-based sampling size of 410 responses. Most of the respondents were university 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.

On balancing the strengths and weaknesses, this study was warranted and the findings worthy of notice. 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 universal acceptability and applicability of HAM. Instead, this study was meant to stimulate discussion on this complex but not actively investigated area. This researcher believes there is much room for further research in an attempt to fill the noticeable gap between reality and self-reported attitudinal assessment of SOH as well as possible correlations between humour appreciation, sense of humour, personality, and social adjustment in a cross-cultural and international context.
References


