

BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY
APPLIED COGNITIVE PSYCHOLOGY DOCTORAL SCHOOL

SUMMARY OF THE Ph.D. THESIS
HUMOR DYNAMICS IN GROUP INTERACTIONS

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Summary

This doctoral thesis focuses on humor as an emergent group-level communication phenomenon and investigates humor as an event that emerges in a social context and influences different aspects of group functioning, with the main aim of corroborating evidence for the consolidation of the construct as a group-level phenomenon. The thesis is comprised of five papers investigating the diverse ways humor functions within group settings, looking at antecedents and consequences of humor such as leadership emergence, teamwork engagement, conflict, satisfaction, emotional intelligence, psychological safety and personality. With the use of diverse methodology ranging from experimental, longitudinal, cross-sectional designs to a systematic review, the thesis provides a roadmap for interpreting past humor literature as well as highlighting gaps and directions for future research.

Keywords:

Humor, leadership, group, affect, engagement, conflict, satisfaction, emotional intelligence, psychological safety, personality

CHAPTER I. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1.1. Introduction to the Research Subject

Humor is the salt of every human conversation. Just like almost every culture uses salt in their food, humor is also a universal phenomenon (Lefcourt, 2001). The absence of salt in a dish might make the meal seem boring or incomplete, and on a similar note, the absence of humor in a conversation can make it feel insipid and uninspiring. On the other hand, too much salt can ruin the food, just as too much humor can spoil the conversation. Therefore, we are continuously investigating ways to balance humor in group conversations in order to achieve interpersonal and collective benefits. This doctoral thesis focuses on humor as an emergent group-level communication phenomenon that is used to amuse others during social interactions (Curseu & Fodor, 2016; Gheorghe et al., 2022; Martin & Ford, 2018). Given the ubiquity of humor in our daily lives, it is no wonder that multiple meta-analyses have emerged as an attempt to summarize and integrate the empirical research conducted thus far at the individual level. To name a few, humor seems to: improve employee health and many work-related outcomes (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012); enhance positive affect and purchase intentions (Eisend, 2009); increase relationship satisfaction in romantic relationships (Hall, 2017); have positive effects on people's life satisfaction, self-esteem and optimism (Schneider et al., 2018); and improve leadership effectiveness with various effects on employee performance, satisfaction, organizational commitment and intention to stay (Cooper et al., 2018; Kong et al., 2019). While this abundance of studies helps to advance our knowledge regarding humor and reduces the ambiguity of the construct, most of these studies are conducted with pure focus on the individual level, ignoring

for the most part the fact that humor often emerges in social group contexts. One reason for the proliferation of individual studies could be that theories related to humor emergence and appreciation (e.g., superiority, incongruity, relief, benign-violation theory) were formulated at the individual level (Gruner, 1997; Morreall, 1982; Spencer, 1860; Warren et al., 2021; Warren & McGraw, 2015). This doctoral thesis looks beyond mere amusement and individual effects, and investigates humor as a phenomenon that emerges in a social context and influences different aspects of group functioning, with the main aim of corroborating evidence for the consolidation of humor as a group-level phenomenon.

1.2. Importance of the Research

Throughout human history, groups have been essential for development and achievement, influencing every aspect of our lives (Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006). The majority of people on this planet are not living or working alone, and most organizations rely on teams to accomplish modern complex tasks and projects (Bell, et al., 2018; Hackman, 2011). This means that interpersonal dynamics, including humor, have massive implications for social and organizational outcomes. From an evolutionary perspective, humor has emerged as a tool that supports social interactions, bonding and cohesion (Dezecache & Dunbar, 2012; Dunbar, 2017; Gervais & Wilson, 2005). Therefore, it always had a group-centric aspect. Given this social origin of humor, its effects are likely to be observed across different levels of organization, and by focusing solely on individual effects, researchers and practitioners risk missing its broader impact. Just as scientists who try to understand the nature of the universe, we do not analyze only the particles that compose an atom, but look also at the relationships they have with each other. Similarly, to truly understand the

emergence and functions of humor, we must adopt a multilevel approach that extends beyond individual effects, into the domain of group dynamics. The electrons in an atom are not static, but constantly moving and interacting. In a similar note, humor is dynamic, being shaped by the group context and the interactions that take place within groups. Consider, for example, a scenario where a person tells a humorous story at work. The laughter of a single colleague can be contagious, making others laugh even if they did not completely understand or hear the story. At the same time, the person telling the joke might change their discourse in real-time based on the response from the collective and increased awareness of group norms. It is essentially this group dynamic – the intersection of individual and collective factors – that we must not ignore. By simply studying an individual's reactions to jokes, we are isolating the electron from the atom – we might get an insight, but not the whole picture.

This thesis adds a number of contributions to the field of humor research. From a theoretical standpoint, the main contribution lies within increasing our understanding of how humor functions in group contexts. While we are many times more likely to laugh in groups rather than when we are by ourselves (Provine & Fischer, 1989), most of the literature has neglected the social context in which humor emerges (Westwood & Johnston, 2013) and we lack a theory of humor as a multilevel phenomenon. The present thesis tries to take the first steps in addressing these gaps.

CHAPTER II. RESEARCH GOALS AND GENERAL METHODOLOGY

Over the course of five studies, the goal of this thesis was to enhance the understanding of how humor functions as a complex, multilevel construct in different group settings and accumulate empirical evidence that will pave the way towards the formulation of group-level humor theories.

In order to achieve this goal, we have conducted four empirical studies with one experimental design, one longitudinal design, and two cross-sectional designs using multilevel approaches, as well as a systematic review.

First, we seek to understand how different types of humor expressed in group conversations relate to current leadership stereotypes, taking into consideration the fact that social expectations regarding gender roles have an impact on how humorous comments are perceived in organizational settings.

Furthermore, we explore what are the positive and negative effects of humor on team-level outcomes and test some core assumptions of the Wheel Model of Humor and Affective Events Theory (Robert & Wilbanks, 2012; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) regarding emotional contagion mechanisms responsible for the development of a humor supportive climate and transmission of humor effects on group attitudes and behaviors. We also aim is to expand the context of our research to cross-cultural settings, in order to increase the generalizability of our findings.

Another goal is to systematically review the literature on group-level humor in order to identify what are the antecedents and consequences of humor within groups, highlighting challenges and opportunities for future research as well as encouraging better research practices that will support the formulation of multilevel humor theories.

A final goal that emerged from the findings of our systematic review is to increase our knowledge on humor antecedents and investigate how group composition factors and leader humor can shape humor dynamics within groups. Overall, a practical aim of the thesis is the delineation of guidelines that can be implemented in various cultural and organizational settings in order to utilize this abundant social resource to cultivate a more positive experience of life.

CHAPTER III. ORIGINAL RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS

3.1. Study 1: Leading Through Affiliation: The Effect of Humor Type and Gender on Likelihood of Being Perceived as a Leader

The first study investigates the causal relationship between the use of humor in group conversation and leadership emergence. While past research emphasized the idea of using humor as a tool for exerting influence and reinforcing different leadership behaviors (Watson & Drew, 2017), most of the studies have investigated the relationship between humor and leadership effectiveness, giving no consideration to the role that humor can play in leadership emergence. We used an experimental design and we collected data from 148 participants, with 73% being female, and an average age of 33.2 years old ($SD = 9.8$) to analyze how different types of humor (affiliative and aggressive) and gender influence the likelihood of being perceived as a leader, shedding light on social expectations and role behaviors. Our results show that people using affiliative humor had a higher perceived chance of emerging as leaders compared to those using aggressive humor and gender itself did not have a significant effect on leadership emergence. Moreover, the affiliative-aggressive humor discrepancy in leadership emergence was higher for men rather than women, pointing to a distinctiveness effect of incongruent role behaviors such that men tend to receive more credit for affiliative humor, while women tend to be penalized less for using aggressive humor in groups. The study contributes to the literature on leadership emergence pointing to differential effects of humor and gender and suggesting ways for reaping the benefits of humor and making better hiring and/or promotion decisions.

3.2. Study 2: The Effect of Humor and Perceived Social Interdependence on Teamwork

Engagement in Student Groups

The second paper included in the thesis aims at taking a step forward toward the investigation of humor as a group-level phenomenon by looking at the effect that humor can have on other group-level constructs. We use a longitudinal multi-level approach to test the impact of social context and engagement in student groups and examine the effect of social interdependence and type of humor on teamwork engagement. We collected data at six-time lags in a sample of 435 students organized in 97 groups. We assess how humor, along with perceived social interdependence, influences team work engagement within student groups, with implications for collaborative learning practices. Our results show that positive interdependence has a positive influence on teamwork engagement, while negative interdependence as well as social independence have a negative effect on teamwork engagement. Moreover, affect mediates the influence of affiliative and aggressive humor communication on teamwork engagement.

3.3. Study 3: Jokes and Quarrels: a Cross-cultural Investigation of Humor and

Conflict Transformation in Groups

For the third study we expand the context of our research and explore the multilevel interplay of humor and intragroup conflict in cross-cultural settings that differ in terms of power distance. We argue that humor in group communication influences interpersonal relations and test liberating and controlling humor as antecedents of task, process and relationship conflict. We collected data using a survey from 536 participants from two different countries varying in power distance

(Romania and The Netherlands) working in groups in organizations from various sectors. Results showed that liberating humor has a positive association with task conflict, while controlling humor has a positive association with both process and relationship conflict. Moreover, task and process conflict mediate the relationship between liberating and controlling humor (predictors) and relationship conflict (outcome). The hypothesis regarding the moderating effect of power distance was not fully supported by the data. Our results offer insights for employees embedded in organizational contexts to understand how different patterns of humorous communication can shape the perception and transformation of conflict within groups.

3.4. Study 4: From I to We in Humor Research: A Systematic Review of the Antecedents and Consequences of Humor in Groups

With the fourth study, we took the issue of consolidating humor as a group-level phenomenon a step further and conducted a systematic review of both quantitative and qualitative research. With this review we answer the question regarding what are the antecedents and consequences of humor in groups and nudge research towards more comprehensive multilevel theories of group humor that not only recognize humor as a collective phenomenon, but also try to explain how it emerges during conversation and how it interacts with other group-level variables. The results indicate that factors such as group composition, familiarity, task structure, trust, cohesion, positive team environment, communication norms, communication channels, and timing dynamics play important roles in the emergence and type of humor expressed within groups. The consequences of humor in groups include the emergence of cohesion, the delineation of group boundaries and identity formation, influence on group atmosphere and affective dynamics, facilitation of

collective coping and team engagement, and potential effects on team performance. We discuss research progress and gaps, and conclude by outlining future research directions.

3.5. Study 5: Personality and Humor in Groups: Implications for Collective Emotional Intelligence, Psychological Safety and Satisfaction

The final study builds on the gaps and future research ideas that we outlined in the systematic review and investigates personal factors such as team personality as antecedents of humoristic communication in groups, as well as the effect that humor has on different team emergent states. We examine how team personality and leader's humor style affect group humor communication, exploring implications for collective emotional intelligence, psychological safety, and satisfaction. We collected data from 304 employees (180 women) with an average age of 31.5 years old nested in 83 groups in various Romanian organizations and 83 leaders (41 women, with an average age of 36.13 years old) that agreed to participate in the study. Our results show that extraversion is positively associated with group affiliative humor, while neuroticism has a positive association with group aggressive humor. The leader's affiliative humor style had a significant positive effect on group affiliative humor, while the effect of leader's aggressive humor style on the use of aggressive humor in groups was not significant. We found that group aggressive humor mediates the association between neuroticism and group emotional intelligence, psychological safety and satisfaction, while affiliative humor mediates the association between extraversion and emotional intelligence and team satisfaction.

CHAPTER IV. CONCLUSIONS AND GENERAL DISCUSSION

The main aim of this thesis was to understand how humor functions within group settings and to synthesize the findings in order to consolidate humor as a group-level construct, hoping to aid the formulation of future multilevel theories of humor. In the remainder of this section, I will reflect on the insights that emerged from our research relative to the objectives laid out in the introductory chapters.

As we have argued throughout this thesis, humor is not just an individual-level phenomenon; it influences, and is influenced by the social context and the group environment (Curseu & Fodor, 2016; Romero & Pescosolido, 2008). By taking into consideration the multidimensionality of humor, namely the existence of different humor types and understanding how they intersect with gender and contribute differently to leadership emergence, we have extended our knowledge of how humor functions within group settings. The probability of a group member to emerge as a leader is not the sole result of individual capabilities, but it is also the product of group perception, translated into leadership related stereotypes. In addition, the way that different humor types (e.g., affiliative and aggressive) are perceived also depends on the gender of the person making the joke, meaning that humor is shaped by social representations of gender roles. Interestingly, our study also points toward a shift in time regarding the stereotypical representation of leadership, so that it is not equal with the agentic, male stereotype, but it also includes communal characteristics of the female stereotype (Badura et al., 2018). This might lead us to think that the effects of humor on various group aspects might be different from those a few decades ago, underscoring the need of taking into consideration current social representations

when investigating humor. In more simple terms, we did not investigate who makes the jokes and who gets to lead, but how the environment where these events happen influences how the jokes are appreciated and how they impact other variables which were also shaped by the environment.

In order to highlight that humor operates at multiple levels within organizations (Romero & Arendt, 2011), we have used a multilevel approach that takes into consideration both within-group effects and group-effects across three different studies. We showed how humor expressed in group conversations from both educational and work contexts influences various group-level variables such as team work engagement, intragroup conflict, psychological safety, group emotional intelligence and team satisfaction. Our main contribution resides in the conceptualization and measurement of the variables included in the study at the appropriate level of analysis (Sosik, 2012), addressing a previous gap in the literature where the level of measurement or data analysis does not match the level of theory. Through our work, we have accumulated evidence for the conceptualization of humor as an emergent construct that operates beyond individual-level effects and change the way that past literature is interpreted, meaning that what was previously thought to be the result of individual effects, might also have been driven by group-level variables.

Another aim of this thesis was to help disentangle the positive and negative effects of humor operating in complex group settings. What we mean by complexity is that groups have different member compositions (e.g., they vary in gender structure and personality), there are different types of groups (e.g., student teams and work teams), and they operate in various industries and cultures. We have tested the effect of different types of humor and their distinct impact on varied aspects of group functioning and effectiveness. Corroborating the idea that humor has multiple functions in social groups (Meyer, 2000), we have found that positive humor styles

such as affiliative and liberating have positive effects on team emergent states (e.g., engagement, satisfaction, psychological safety and emotional intelligence), while negative humor styles such as aggressive and controlling seem to have a negative impact on these emergent states.

We must interpret these differential effects of humor, however, in light of various moderator variables. The gender of the group members is one such variable of interest. For example, the affiliative-aggressive humor discrepancy in leadership emergence was higher for men than for women in our first study; the positive relationship between the use of affiliative humor in groups and teamwork engagement was stronger for women than for men in our second study; and groups composed predominantly of men showed a tendency to engage in more aggressive use of humor in communication, compared to the groups predominantly composed of women in our fifth study. Another variable of interest is represented by the cultural context where the study was conducted. The results of our third paper indicate that the positive association between controlling humor and intragroup relationship conflict was stronger for the Dutch, than for the Romanian groups. Therefore, these findings display variations in the perception and utilization of humor in different group settings, highlighting the need to consider group composition factors (both surface-level and deep-level) and cultural factors in the study of humor in order to increase the generalizability and accuracy of research findings.

One more goal of this thesis was to understand how humor in groups has been conceptualized in past research, what antecedent conditions influence its emergence, and what its group-level consequences are. Through this endeavor, we build a lighthouse in the field of humor research, shining light on both the past and future of this domain. Through our analysis of the 41 studies included in the systematic review, we were able to sketch a framework that illustrates how variables related to group composition and context can act as antecedents of humor, which further

impacts group processes, emergent states and outcomes, sometimes with surprising effects. For example, while the rest of the studies included in this doctoral thesis point towards negative effects of aggressive humor on group functioning, one of the findings of the systematic review highlights the fact that sometimes negative humor is in fact a tool used for building cohesion. This underscores the need for research that delineates boundary conditions more clearly, provides operational definitions of negative humor and considers a wide range of outcomes.

A theoretical insight of interest that emerged from our review is the increased reliance on the compilational approach (Kozlowski & Chao, 2012; Kozlowski et al., 2013) for studying humor, which is centered on the idea that ‘groups as entities develop humorous communication patterns’ (Curseu & Fodor, 2016, p. 4) and the entire group is the point of reference when measuring humor. While this macro view of a group provides significant contributions, it might not catch all the intricacies of how preferences for individual humor styles operate within these groups. A further question to ask ourselves would be how these individual humor styles coexist and impact the overall group humor dynamic. Namely, how do individual preferences for humor styles get translated into configurations at the group level? Should we strive for harmony or dissonance of humor styles within groups, depending on different outcomes of interest? Is there an effect of majority or minority influence of individual humor styles relative to the group’s overall humor pattern? In other words, can a few ‘positive humor endorsers’ change the humor dynamics of the whole group or can one ‘negative humor endorser’, through contagion, spoil the entire group humor climate? What members possess the most influence in these situations? These insights are valuable for a variety of contexts because apart from enhancing our understanding of humor, they could also inform intervention practices. Thus, the way forward seems to be a complementary approach of compilational and compositional research.

A final aim of the thesis was based on an emergent result from the systematic review related to the need for investigating more humor antecedents using quantitative designs. While humor is often perceived through the lens of individual experiences, at its core it represents a social phenomenon, operating at multiple levels. Our results show that individual differences within groups (i.e. personality traits) and differences between groups (i.e. leader humor style) have a significant impact on humor at the group level, further validating its identity as a multilevel construct.

From a practical perspective, this thesis can provide a number of recommendations to organizations, teams and educators to help them harness this social resource named humor. Knowing that affiliative humor in particular is a potent tool for influencing someone's chances of emerging as a leader, we could advise people interested in advancing their careers to adopt this humor style and express it in group contexts in order bolster positive affect and create feelings of inclusion. At the same time, organizations can promote this humor style as one of the values central to their culture and embed it in cultural artifacts, organizational rituals and practices, as well as using it in leader training programs. We should not forget, however, that biases in humor perception based on characteristics of the person using humor such as gender, can impact differently their chances of becoming a leader. Raising awareness of this nuanced effect in order to promote unbiased promotional decisions should become a priority for organizations.

Another suggestion grounded in the leadership domain stems from our results regarding the effect of leader humor on group-level humor. As role models, leaders have the influence necessary to encourage the adoption of affiliative humor within their teams, enhancing emotional intelligence and satisfaction. At the same time, although the effect of leader aggressive humor on

group aggressive humor was not significant in our study, suggesting a lack of contagion, the ripple effects of aggressive humor should not be underestimated, given the rest of negative effects of aggressive humor in general.

Taking into consideration the double-edged sword nature of humor within groups, we advise managers to pay attention to the situations where humor could be a valuable resource (by promoting engagement, triggering task conflicts that could foster creativity, fostering group emotional intelligence and satisfaction) and when it can become a burden if mismanaged. In order to reduce the risk of misinterpretation of humorous cues and emergence of relationship conflicts, leaders should strive to develop a climate of psychological safety first. On a similar note, we ask for caution when using controlling humor, given its positive effect on relationship conflicts.

Another practical recommendation emerges from our findings that the composition of a team in terms of personality factors can influence its type of group-level humor. Since this line of research is still in its infancy, we do not advise managers to compose teams based on personality traits conducive of positive humor styles, but rather to educate team members about this humor-personality interaction in order to promote awareness at the group level and thoughtful communication. By developing a transactive memory system of humor dynamics inside a group, members can start recognizing which members are more at risk of interpreting cues in communication in negative terms, and which members can balance out sarcastic comments with more relationship enhancing jokes, leading to interactions that are a bit more mindful.

Finally, moving to academic settings, we invite educators to integrate structured humor elements with an affiliative nature in their team-based activities during classes and group assignments in order to foster engagement. This could be achieved by asking the moderators of each group to receive the ‘special task’ of opening their meetings with a funny icebreaker, or giving

out the tasks that make up bigger projects at spaced intervals and including amusing examples or reflection questions (e.g., “If you were to bet a kidney on which factors are more important for the emergence of creativity in groups, what options would you choose: a. the structure of the group – namely individual creativity levels, or b. creativity supporting group processes? Motivate your answers for both the evaluators and your kidney”). Especially in the context of long, complex tasks, interspersing them with humor breaks could help maintain enthusiasm and focus, and protect them from the adverse impact of prolonged projects.

By understanding and managing the potential traps and downfalls of humor, organizations, teams and educators can make better use of this resource, and make positive changes in their environments.

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