

Running Head: SENSES OF HUMOR

Senses of Humor and Comedic Television Show Preference

Poster presented to the Annual Conference of the International Society for Humor Studies,
Youngstown, OH, June 2005

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Abstract

This paper is Part II of an attempt to validate a multi-factor scale for senses of humor. Part I was presented at the 2004 International Communication Association's Conference and dealt with the development, testing, and validation of a humor appreciation scale. The data from three surveys suggest that one's sense of humor may appropriately be thought of as multidimensional, and emergent humor dimensions—derived from a factor analysis of the data—may be validated with preferences for particular media content. In Part I, the emergent dimensions were validated with preferences for popular motion pictures. In the continued validation of a multi-factor scale, we examine the humor dimensions with preferences for popular TV shows. The results, again, suggest that the emergent dimensions of humor can in fact be validated by preferences for particular types of television content.

Using a grounded theory approach, we exhaustively examined the humor literature and developed constructs via in-depth interviewing and participant observations. By doing so, we concluded that the framework for understanding our notion of multidimensional humor appreciation has seven propositions as initially reported by Neuendorf, Skalski, & Powers (2004) and outlined below.

Proposition 1 states that sense of humor is not singular, but, rather that **multidimensional senses of humor exist**. These multiple dimensions of humor appreciation may be correlated, but represent different orientations toward potentially humorous material. Further, these senses of humor are relatively stable and enduring to the individual (which shouldn't surprise us all that much since we wouldn't expect our senses of humor to change, unless our self-concepts changed, too).

Proposition 2 states that **all humans possess some type of humor appreciation**, and anecdotal claims of identifying an individual with "no sense of humor" are actually instances where the sense of humor profiles of the two individuals involved have little overlap. The point is that everyone has a sense of humor and we perhaps have a tendency to equate a "good sense of humor" with someone whose multidimensional senses of humor are similar to our own.

Proposition 3 states that **an individual may demonstrate a preference for a single dimension of humor, or for multiple dimensions**. In other words, we can think of "sense of humor" as being either one-dimensional or multidimensional.

Proposition 4 states that these **(sense of humor) profiles will predict preferences for stimuli with potential for humorous responses**. In other words, an individual with a

humor profile that demonstrates a preference for slapstick should, in fact, be drawn to films and television programs that offer such fare.

Proposition 5 states that **a stimulus with humor potential (e.g., a joke, a television program, a film) may evoke either single-dimension or multiple-dimension humor responses** in audience members. In other words, two individuals might watch the same comedic television program and find it humorous, but for completely different reasons. For instance, I might enjoy watching *The Simpsons* because of its layered satirical content, while someone else may like the program for its outrageous situations.

Proposition 6 states that **the extent to which two individuals' humor profiles match will be a strong determinant of their interpersonal relationship potential—romantically or otherwise**. In other words, individuals with similar humor profiles will get along better with each other at work, at home, and so on. Put another way, it is probably likely that we have friends who seem to laugh at the same things we do.

Finally, proposition 7 states that **a stimulus with strong potential for evoking multiple-dimension humor responses is likely to be more popular**. In order for a film or a television show to be a big hit, it needs to appeal to millions of people. One way to do this is to produce material that receivers find humorous across many dimensions—rather than just one.

These seven propositions serve as the basis/theoretic framework of the material presented here, but we will only be addressing propositions 1 and 4 directly, since this is a continuation of the development and validation of multi-factor senses of humor scale.

Methods

In December of 2001, a two-part survey was administered to undergraduate students enrolled in the basic communications course at an urban Midwestern university. The respondents (N=314) were 51% male, with a median household income of \$40,001-\$50,000 and an average age of 21. Less than a third identified themselves as being “liberal” (29%), and less than a quarter identified themselves as being “conservative” (23%). More than 4 of 5 reported a religious affiliation (83%).

A 26-item senses of humor scale was developed based on two previous data collections (Neuendorf et. al, 2004) and included new items measuring appreciation for self-deprecating humor, social criticism, dry humor, and disparagement humor geared toward men, women, arrogant people, and so on). All 26 items are available in Appendix A.

The key purpose of this paper is to test the criterion validity of the different dimensions of humor. To this end, the questionnaire asked respondents about “how much they liked” different TV shows were on a 0-10 scale, if they had seen them. An examination of all comedic television programs available via broadcast, cable, or satellite (per the published program schedules) for the market where the survey was administered netted 193 shows being included in the instrument. Respondents were asked to indicate how much they liked each program from 0 (not at all) to 10 (very much) for only those of the 193 that they had seen. We also asked the respondents to give us an estimate as to how many times they had seen each program in the “last three months” and how many times “ever.”

After the data had been collected, the next step was to select a roster of TV programs that fairly represented the consistent factors that emerged from two previous data collections (Neuendorf, et. al, 2004) including sexual/scatological humor, realistic humor, satire/slapstick, and stupid humor.

Two males with advanced college degrees in mass communication and heavy viewers of TV comedies were asked to code each of the programs that they watched regularly in terms of whether the *primary* source of humor in the show was sexual/scatological, realistic, satirical/slapstick, or stupid. Then two to three programs for each emerged factor category where there was agreement were selected as representatives for that category. *The Simpsons* and *Frasier* served as the representative shows for the satire/slapstick factor; *Friends*, *Malcolm in the Middle* and *King of the Hill* served as the representative shows for the realistic factor; *Married with Children* and *The Man Show* served as the representative shows for the sexual/scatological factor; and *Jackass* and *The Drew Carey Show* served as the representative shows for the stupid humor factor. Following in the footsteps of Neuendorf et. al's (2004) criterion validity test for how funny certain films were, these TV programs were chosen due to the likely relationships with the humor factors that emerged from two previous data collections.

Results and Discussion

Since the goal here is to work toward the validation of a multi-factor senses of humor scale, the complete 26-item humor scale was factor analyzed (principal component, oblique rotation, latent root criterion). Oblique rotation was selected due to the clear possibility of humor preferences being related. One of the items ("I enjoy jokes involving

wordplay”) loaded poorly and on its own factor initially, so the item was dropped and a second-run was completed.

Six factors emerged from the analysis, accounting for 62.4% of the pooled variance. We titled the first factor as “put down humor” and it includes the following items—with loadings in parentheses: “I like humor that puts down rich people” (.75), “I like humor that puts down men” (.74), “I like humor that puts down arrogant people” (.73), “I like humor that puts down women” (.70), “I enjoy humor that criticizes society” (.60), and “I like humor about death” (.58).

We titled the second factor to emerge as “stupid/blooper” humor and it contained the following items: “I find bloopers especially funny” (.76), “something is funny if it happens accidentally” (.68), and “I find it funny when people do stupid things” (.60).

We titled the third factor to emerge as “realistic humor” and it contained the following items: “something is funny to me only if I find the situation realistic” (.87), and “something is funny to me only if I think it could really happen” (.80).

The fourth factor to emerge deals with “incongruity” and is titled accordingly. It contained the following items: “I find things funny if they are absurd” (.65), “I find amazing coincidences funny” (.60), “I like sarcasm” (.59), “I like dry humor” (.57), and “I like self-deprecating humor” (.56).

The fifth factor that emerged is titled “satire/slapstick humor” and included the following items: “I enjoy slapstick” (.80), “I enjoy satire” (.76), and “I like sight gags” (.65).

The sixth and final factor that emerged is titled “sexual/scatological humor” and includes the following items: “I like humor about sex” (.73), “I like humor that is naughty”

(.73), “I like sick humor” (.66), “I enjoy humor that involves violence” (.65), and “I like humor that puts down racial/ethnic groups” (.61).

Criterion-related validity: TV show preferences

The factor scores from the two-part survey data collection were saved as variables and used to predict/associate the viewing of television shows in an effort to establish criterion validity and to further help our overall goal of validating a multi-factor senses of humor scale. Specifically, we wanted to illustrate the concurrent validity of humor types with regard to television show preference. As one might suspect, the expectation here is that certain humor preferences would correlate with certain television comedy preferences. For example, we would expect that a preference for “stupid” humor would correlate with “stupid” humor television shows. The TV show preference items that asked about how much the respondents liked each program from 0 to 10, where 0 = “don’t like at all,” and 10 = “like very much” were correlated using Pearson’s correlation coefficients with four of the robust factors to emerge from the two-part survey data collection. Specifically, the robust factors used were “stupid/blooper humor,” “realistic humor,” “slapstick/satire humor,” and “sexual/scatological humor.”

The first factor related to exposure patterns was “sexual/scatological humor.” Our expectation was that preference for this type of humor would be related to liking the television shows *Married with Children* and *The Man Show*—two shows coded as having lots of sexual/scatological humor. This expectation received complete support, as preferences for both television comedies, among those who had seen them, correlated

significantly with the “sexual/scatological” factor variable (*Married with Children* $r = .314$, $p < .001$, $N = 193$; *The Man Show* $r = .433$, $p < .001$, $N = 100$).

A second test included the “stupid/blooper” factor, and here we expected a relationship with the comedies *Jackass* and *The Drew Carey Show*. Here, again, the test was supported as the factor was significantly related with both programs (*Jackass* $r = .264$, $p \leq .001$, $N = 149$; *The Drew Carey Show* $r = .206$, $p < .01$).

A third test examined the “satire/slapstick” factor. Here, we anticipated a relationship between the factor and the TV programs *The Simpsons* and *Frasier*. This test was also supported (*The Simpsons* $r = .154$, $p < .05$, $N = 222$; *Frasier* $r = .235$, $p < .01$).

A final test examined the “realistic” factor. The coders had difficulty identifying comedies with “realistic” humor perhaps because the concept is difficult to interpret. In the end, three programs were selected for their “realistic humor” content—*Malcolm in the Middle*, *Friends*, and *King of the Hill*. This test was only partially supported as significant Pearson correlations were found only for *Malcolm in the Middle* and *King of the Hill* (*Malcolm in the Middle* $r = .164$, $p < .05$, $N = 163$; *King of the Hill* $r = .182$, $p > .05$, $N = 146$), but not for *Friends* ($r = -.022$, $p = ns$, $N = 204$). The results for *Friends* were surprisingly pointed in the wrong direction, though not significantly so.

Finally, the correlations between each of the four factor variables and the other programs (minus the representative programs used for each factor) were examined to rebuke the claim that all four of the humor factors are correlated with all comedy TV programs. The first factor, “sexual/scatological” humor, was significantly related to liking *Jackass* ($r = .211$, $p < .05$, $N = 146$), *Drew Carey* ($r = .195$, $p < .01$, $N = 222$), and *The Simpsons* ($r = .216$, $p < .01$, $N = 224$), but not to *Friends*, *Frasier*, *Malcolm in the Middle*,

or *King of the Hill*. While the sexual/scatological factor did relate to other programs, the relationships are not that surprising considering that the programs in question also contain sexual material.

The second factor, “stupid/blooper” humor, was significantly related to liking *Friends* ($r = .182, p < .01, N = 206$), *The Man Show* ($r = .316, p \leq .001, N = 102$), and *Married with Children* ($r = .295, p < .001, N = 196$), but not to *The Simpsons*, *Frasier*, *King of the Hill*, or *Malcolm in the Middle*. While both *The Man Show* and *Married with Children* exhibit lots of “stupid” humor (so we are not surprised by the relationship), our two coders felt *Friends* exhibits realistic humor elements and sexual/scatological humor elements, but not stupid humor elements, so we are somewhat perplexed by this finding. One possible explanation, though this seems unlikely to us, is that researchers have indicated that we watch television for a variety of reasons including to maintain a certain level of social currency, and to spend time with our families and friends (Comstock & Scharrer, 1999). It is possible then, since *Friends* was such a mega-success, that many of our respondents watched *Friends* because they had family members/others who liked to watch the program and they simply joined them, or because they wanted to watch the program just so they could converse about it with others. The point here is that maybe not everyone who watches the show on a regular basis does so because he/she likes the program.

Based on these first two factors, there appears to be a relationship between sexual/scatological humor preferences and stupid/blooper human preferences, so in a bit of post-hoc analysis, we ran the correlations between those two factor variables across all 193 programs and we see that there is a significant correlation between the two factor variables

($r = .381$, $p < .001$, $N = 247$). This result shouldn't surprise anyone who has watched a lot of comedic television, at least comedic TV produced in the United States, as many "sex" humor comedies have large doses of "stupid" humor, too, and many "stupid" humor shows have lots of sex humor, as well.

The third factor, "satire/slapstick" humor, was significantly related to liking only Drew Carey ($r = .256$, $p < .001$, $N = 222$) and not to any of the other programs. Again, this is not at all surprising given the number of sight gags that have appeared on the Drew Carey show throughout its run.

Lastly, the fourth factor, "realistic" humor, was not significantly related to liking any of the other programs besides those coded as being realistic (*Malcolm in the Middle* and *King of the Hill*).

By comparing the relationships of the factor variables with the other programs, we see additional support for our criterion validity as none of the variables related significantly to *all* of the programs, and only one finding was surprising (the "stupid/blooper" factor variable being related to *Friends*). It is clear, then, that these factor variables are linked to certain preferences for media content.

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