Short Communication

Lonely people tend to make fun of themselves: A behavior genetic analysis of humor styles and loneliness

Julie Aitken Schermer a,⁎, Rod A. Martin b, Philip A. Vernon b, Nicholas G. Martin c, Lucia Colodro Conde c, Dixie Statham d, Michael T. Lynskey e

a Management and Organizational Studies, Faculty of Social Science, The University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, N6A 5C2, Canada
b Department of Psychology, Faculty of Social Science, The University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada
c QIMR Berghofer Medical Research Institute, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia
d University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, Australia
e Addictions Department, Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience, King’s College London, London, England

Abstract

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The present study examined the phenotypic, genetic, and environmental correlations between four humor styles (affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating) and loneliness in Australian adult twins. At the phenotypic level, the two adaptive humor style dimensions (affiliative and self-enhancing) were found to correlate negatively with loneliness and the two maladaptive humor style dimensions (aggressive and self-defeating) were found to have positive correlations with loneliness. Because both humor and loneliness were found to be heritable (ranging from 7% for loneliness to 35% for self-defeating humor style), bivariate genetic analyses were conducted. Significant genetic and unique environmental correlations were found between loneliness and humor styles with the exception of aggressive humor. These results indicate that the phenotypic association between loneliness and humor style arises from the influence of shared familial and unique environmental factors.

Keywords:
Humor
Loneliness
Twins
Behavior genetics

1. Introduction

The present study investigates the relationship between loneliness and how people use humor (their individual humor styles). In addition, because the present sample is from adult twins, bivariate genetic analyses were conducted to assess the degree to which the phenotypic correlations observed between loneliness and humor styles is due to common genetic and/or environmental factors.

1.1. Humor and psychological correlates

The Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ; Martin, Puhl-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003) assesses four (two socially positive and two socially negative) dimensions relating to uses of humor, which have been found to be correlated with individual differences in psychological well-being. The two socially positive humor styles are affiliative humor, which involves using humor to enhance interpersonal relationships, and self-enhancing humor, or using humor to alleviate personal distress. The two socially negative styles include aggressive humor, such as making fun of others in a disparaging manner, and self-defeating humor, or using excessively self-disparaging humor in an attempt to ingratiate oneself with others. These humor styles have been found to correlate with mental health dimensions. For example, positive correlations, of moderate magnitude, have been reported between the positive humor styles and social competence (Fitts, Sebby, & Zlokovich, 2009), happiness (Ford, McCreight, & Richardson, 2014), perceived social support, satisfaction with life (Dyck & Holtzman, 2013), and resiliency (Cann & Collette, 2014). The socially positive humor styles have been found to have moderate negative correlations with shyness (Fitts et al., 2009), depression, perceived burdensomeness, thwarted belongingness, suicidal ideation (Tucker, Wingate, O’Keefe, Slish, Judah, & Rhoades-Kerswill, 2013), depressive symptoms (Dyck & Holtzman, 2013; Tucker, Judah, O’Keefe, Mills, Lechner, Davidson, Grant, & Wingate, 2013), neuroticism (Dyck & Holtzman, 2013), social anxiety (Tucker, Judah, et al., 2013), and borderline personality disorder (Schermer et al., 2015). Self-enhancing humor has also been found to have a moderate positive correlation with psychological well-being (Cann & Collette, 2014) and a moderate negative relationship with chronic worrying (Cann & Ann, 2013).

The two socially negative humor styles have been found to have moderate negative correlations with happiness (Ford et al., 2014) and positively with thwarted belongingness, suicidal ideation (Tucker, Wingate, et al., 2013), depressive symptoms (Tucker, Judah, et al., 2013), and chronic worrying (Cann & Collette, 2014).
2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were from a cross-sectional twin study from Australia (see Baughman et al., 2012; Lynskey et al., 2012) and included 747 pairs of same-sex adult twins (309 monozygotic (MZ) female pairs, 138 MZ male pairs, 216 dizygotic (DZ) female pairs, and 84 DZ male pairs) recruited through the National Health and Medical Research Council Australian Twin Registry. The mean age was 34.83 years (SD = 2.92, range = 23 to 48). Age was found to not differ across the zygosity and sex combinations (F(3,1973) = 0.27, p > 0.80).

2.2. Measures and procedure

Individuals completed a battery of questionnaires as part of a larger study (see description by Lynskey et al., 2012). Included in the set of questionnaires were three questions assessing loneliness from the revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell et al., 1980). Items asked how often an individual felt that they lacked companionship, how often the individual felt that they were “left out”, and how often the individual felt that they were “isolated from others”. Responses to these items were on a 1 Hardly ever to 3 Often scale. The internal consistency (coefficient alpha) for these three items was 0.82 in the present data therefore a total loneliness score was generated as an aggregate of the three items. For the present sample, the mean was 4.41 (SD = 1.60), a value similar to the sample of twins from The Netherlands (Distel et al., 2010).

Individuals also completed the Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ; Martin et al., 2003). The HSQ consists of 32 items and measures four styles of humor: affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating. For the present sample, the internal consistency values were: 86 for affiliative, 82 for self-enhancing, 71 for aggressive, and 83 for self-defeating.

3. Results

Table 1 reports the bivariate genetic models computed, the AE model was the best fitting model. For all of the bivariate genetic models computed, the AE model was found to have the best fit, indicating that the phenotypic correlations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>MZr</th>
<th>DZr</th>
<th>a²</th>
<th>c²</th>
<th>e²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affiliative humor</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.34 (0.09 to 0.48)</td>
<td>0.08 (0.00 to 0.30)</td>
<td>0.58 (0.51 to 0.66)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-enhancing humor</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.28 (0.07 to 0.36)</td>
<td>0.00 (0.00 to 0.18)</td>
<td>0.72 (0.64 to 0.80)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggressive humor</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.32 (0.07 to 0.51)</td>
<td>0.14 (0.00 to 0.35)</td>
<td>0.54 (0.48 to 0.61)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-defeating humor</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.35 (0.14 to 0.57)</td>
<td>0.18 (0.00 to 0.36)</td>
<td>0.47 (0.41 to 0.54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loneliness</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.07 (0.01 to 0.35)</td>
<td>0.21 (0.00 to 0.33)</td>
<td>0.72 (0.63 to 0.81)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a² = additive genetic; c² = common environment; e² = unique environment; values in brackets represent the 95% confidence intervals and those not containing zero are deemed to be significant.
were best explained by common genetic and unique environmental factors.

The results of the bivariate genetic analyses are reported in Table 2. Correlations with a 95% confidence interval (values within the brackets) that do not include zero are considered to be statistically significant. The results were found to be very similar (or the same) when the uncorrected and the corrected (age and sex regressed) data were analyzed. Because of the similar results, the uncorrected results are presented in the present study. As reported in Table 2, three of the four genetic and unique environmental correlations were significant with the exception of aggressive humor, suggesting that for the other three humor styles, the observed phenotypic correlations with loneliness were due to common genetic and unique environmental influences.

4. Discussion

The present study examined the correlations between humor styles and loneliness at the phenotypic, genetic, and environmental levels. In general, positive humor styles were found to be negatively correlated with loneliness whereas the negative humor styles were found to be positively correlated with loneliness (although the correlation with aggressive humor was small). These correlations were similar to the results reported by Fitts et al. (2009) in their sample of undergraduate students, although the present study was not limited to a student sample and goes beyond reporting the phenotypic correlations. Following bivariate analyses, three of the four phenotypic correlations were found to also have significant genetic and unique environmental correlations with the largest value found between self-defeating humor and loneliness. These results expand the understanding of the relationship between humor styles and loneliness by demonstrating that the observed correlations can be partially explained by common genetic and unique environmental factors.

In general, both the results reported by Fitts et al. (2009) and the present study suggest that people who engage in affiliative and self-enhancing humor styles are less lonely which may reflect the positive social nature of these styles of humor. In contrast, those people who make fun of themselves (engage in self-defeating humor) are more likely to be lonely. One possible reason for this finding is that if a person is making fun of them self, people around that individual may be uncomfortable (realize that they are laughing at the person and not with them) and therefore may avoid that individual. Future research may want to explore the reaction people have when exposed to a self-defeating humorist and whether or not individuals feel uncomfortable and wish to leave the situation. Alternatively, shyness may play a role in the relationship between self-defeating humor and loneliness as Hampes (2006) reported that shyness is positively correlated with self-defeating humor because of the low self-esteem felt by shy people.

In both the present study and the results reported by Fitts et al. (2009), aggressive humor styles did not have robust correlations with loneliness. A possible explanation for this finding is that although aggressive humor is anti-social in nature, people who engage in aggressive humor may seek out the company of others who also engage in aggressive humor and experience a positive social bond with those people. Future research may want to investigate how aggressive humor styles play a role with friendships and whether or not aggressive humorists do seek out the company of others who engage in aggressive humor.

Although the present study is limited in that the study was cross-sectional and the majority of the sample was female, the findings are unique in that the genetic and environmental correlations add to the understanding of loneliness and humor. Although future research is required to determine the malleability of humor styles, instruction in, or encouragement of, social humor styles (affiliative and self-enhancing humor) may be beneficial for lonely individuals.

References


Table 2
Phenotypic, genetic, and environmental correlations between humor styles and loneliness.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Humor style</th>
<th>Phenotypic</th>
<th>Genetic</th>
<th>Unique environmental</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affiliative</td>
<td>−0.22</td>
<td>−0.35</td>
<td>(−0.20 to −0.49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-enhancing</td>
<td>−0.25</td>
<td>−0.28</td>
<td>(−0.09 to −0.45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggressive</td>
<td>0.08*</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>(−0.10 to 0.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-defeating</td>
<td>0.28*</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>(0.28 to 0.54)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

95% confidence intervals are in the brackets; those which do not contain zero are deemed to be significant and are in bold text. All cross-correlations were best fit by an AE model therefore common environmental correlations are not reported.

* p < 0.001; two-tailed.