

Self-defeating humour promotes psychological well-being, study reveals

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Research news

UGR researchers from the Mind, Brain and Behaviour Research Centre (CIMCYC) have established that individuals who frequently use self-defeating humour—aimed at gaining the approval of others through self-mockery—exhibit greater levels of psychological well-being.



The UGR group's findings, recently published in the prestigious international journal *Personality and Individual Differences*, contradict some of the research carried out to date in the psychology of humour. Up until now, a significant deal of the research literature has suggested that self-defeating humour is exclusively associated with negative psychological effects among individuals who regularly employ this style of humour.

Jorge Torres Marín, one of the researchers behind this groundbreaking UGR project, explains: "In particular, we have observed that a greater tendency to employ self-defeating humour is indicative of high scores in psychological well-being dimensions such as happiness and, to a lesser extent, sociability."

"The results, as well as being consistent with the positive connotations traditionally attributed to the act of 'laughing at oneself' in our country, also suggest that the effects of self-defeating humour on well-being may differ depending on where the research takes places. Consequently, we believe it is necessary to conduct new studies aimed at analysing potential cultural differences in the use of this kind of humour".

The implications arising from cultural or individual differences in terms of "senses of humour" have been poorly addressed in psychological research for two key reasons. Firstly, the comical nature of humour contributes—both among researchers and readers of specialised scientific literature—to certain biases and preconceived ideas that can skew their judgment when it comes to assessing the quality, relevance and applicability of humour-related data. Secondly, the enormous variety of comments,

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behaviours etc. that can be categorised as “humorous” has hindered the creation of a standardised theoretical framework for unifying all of the information collected to date in the scientific literature.

However, Hugo Carretero Dios emphasises: “Our research fits into one of the theoretical models that aim to overcome these limitations and provide the psychology of humour with a well-founded, accurate theoretical body of knowledge. This should enable us to discern the different behavioural tendencies related to the everyday use of humour, which can be classified in even greater depth by focusing on their adaptive, as opposed to their harmful, natures.”

Adaptive styles of humour include affiliative humour, which is aimed at strengthening social relationships. Self-enhancing humour, meanwhile, entails maintaining a humorous outlook in potentially stressful and adverse situations. These types of humour have consistently been linked to indicators of positive psychological well-being such as happiness, satisfaction with life, hope, etc. but also to more negative states such as depression and anxiety.

Moreover, the authors maintain that the “data revealed the existence of a curvilinear relationship between prosocial humour and personality dimensions such as kindness and honesty. This relationship means that low and high scores obtained in such personality traits are respectively linked to lower or higher propensities to make humorous comments aimed at building and strengthening social relationships”.

Styles of humour that can mask negative intentions and feelings

Nonetheless, the researchers are also quick to point out that certain styles of humour may be employed to conceal negative intentions and feelings. As Navarro-Carrillo notes “[the] results suggest that humour, even when presented as benign or well-intentioned, can also represent a strategy for masking negative intentions. Humour enables individuals with low scores in honesty to build trust, closeness, etc. with other people and thereby use important information in order to manipulate them or obtain advantages in the future.”

On the one hand, the results regarding the relationship between the use of humour and anger management suggest that the capacity for maintaining a humorous perspective in adverse situations, i.e. the use of self-enhancing humour, is typically found among people who manage anger more effectively, as well as among those with lower tendencies to exhibit angry feelings or reactions.

By contrast, people who tend to use aggressive or self-defeating humour do not manage anger or rage as well. In particular, aggressive humour is mainly associated with the expression of anger towards others and a greater propensity to experience anger in everyday life. By using aggressive humour, individuals may express

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negative feelings (for example, anger, superiority, hate, etc.) less explicitly than they would through physical or verbal abuse, since they can allude to the humorous nature of the comments they make in order to justify them.

Meanwhile, self-defeating humour was linked to a greater tendency to suppress anger. However, this suppression does not necessarily mean that the anger directed at others is reduced or controlled, but rather that the triggers eliciting such angry reactions are concealed or not explicitly stated.

A novel approach in the psychology of humour

Torres-Marín and Ginés Navarro-Carrillo highlight that: “With the aim of further delving into the existing links between individual differences in the use of humour and other psychological variables of interest, our research pursued the following objectives: firstly, to provide the scientific community with a measuring tool for assessing different styles of humour among the Spanish population; and secondly, to broaden the available knowledge about the links between the tendency to use certain kinds of humour and specific personality traits (by developing analyses designed to test potential curvilinear relationships). And lastly, we aimed to analyse the relationship between the use of humour and anger management, which is particularly relevant to applied psychology.”

The research carried out at the UGR provides a highly useful tool for exploring predispositions related to the use of humour among the Spanish population. Specifically, the international reference scale employed for assessing humour styles, known as the ‘Humor Styles Questionnaire’, was adapted to the Spanish environment as part of the study.

Bibliographical reference:

Jorge Torres-Marín, Ginés Navarro-Carrillo, Hugo Carretero-Dios. Is the use of humor associated with anger management? The assessment of individual differences in humor styles in Spain. *Personality and Individual Differences*. Volume 120, 1 January 2018, Pages 193-201



UGR researchers who carried out the research work. From left to right, Ginés Navarro, Dr. Carretero Dios and Jorge Torres.

Contact information:

Dr. Hugo Carretero Dios

Department of Behavioural Science Methodology of the University of Granada

Phone: +34 958 246 273

E-mail: @email

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/ResearchHumor>