

Humour and Forgiveness: To Forgive is to be Happy?

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ABSTRACT

Humour is the shortest distance between two people but it can also be the longest one. Humour is conceptualized as the amusement or lightheartedness that a person feels in a situation, incident or dialogue which may/may not be shared by others. According to Berger (1971), information may be perceived as funny because of two reasons, namely, its incongruity or its suddenness. Biologically, the positive effects of the humorous slant have been examined and it has been established that a good laugh not only makes one happy, but it also releases happy hormones; improves cardiovascular (improvement of endothelial function), respiratory (improved lung function), metabolic (increase of energy expenditure) and has psychological benefits such as reduced anger, anxiety, depression and stress. (Ferner & Aronson, 2013). The forms and interpretations of humour can be as diverse as human nature and its impression as light as feather or as indelible as ink. Historically humour was perceived negatively by philosophers like Plato, who treated it as an emotion that overrides rational self-control, a certain kind of evil, specifically a vice. Humour, however, can also be perceived as a way of making fun of some situation or someone and letting it out of your system, i.e. forgiving and forgetting about it. According to Peterson and Seligman, (2004) Humour and forgiveness are two fulcrums of Positive psychology. Relief Theory explains laughter as the release of nervous energy (Stanford Encyclopedia of philosophy, 2012) and the ability to forgive others has long been related to lower depression, hostility-anger, paranoid ideation and interpersonal sensitivity (Tangney et.al, 1995).

In the light of such theoretical pinings, forgiveness, humour and happiness were studied across N=100 students of NCR and their dominant humour and forgiveness styles were classified using scales like Humour Styles Questionnaire (Martin et.al, 2003) and Heartland Forgiveness Scale (Thompson and Synder,2003) and Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky and Lepper,1997).

The study examined gender differences in a person's dispositional forgiveness styles and significant differences were found for the way people forgive others $F(2,50) = 7.655^{**}$ and the self $F(2,50) = 6.278^*$. However, no differences were found for situation based forgiveness. The study also looks at gender differences in humour styles and significant differences between the two genders are found in the use of self-defeating humour $F(3,50) = 4.120^*$. No differences are found in the use of affiliative, self-enhancing and aggressive humour styles among the populations based on gender. The implications of these results for the larger societal arena are discussed.

Keywords: Humour, Forgiveness, Gender, Positive Psychology

“There are some things so serious that you have to laugh at them.....”.

Niels Bohr

INTRODUCTION

Humour is everywhere but we need to have the eye for it, it is explicated as *"that quality of action, speech, or writing which excites amusement; oddity, jocularly, facetiousness, comicality, fun"* (Oxford Dictionary). It has also been conceptualised as *"the faculty of perceiving what is ludicrous or amusing, or of expressing it in speech, writing, or other composition; jocosely imagination or treatment of a subject"* (Simpson and Weiner, 1989), humour was believed to be a way to take out aggression by Freud. Humour and laughter are universal and are found in all cultures throughout the world (Lefcourt, 2001). Different cultures have their own rules with regards to expression of humour and the situations where laughter is considered appropriate.

We are witness to the unending travails of a Tom and a Jerry who have shaped the concept of humour for complete generations. The unending slapstick without words of a Mr. Bean requires no explanation much like the universal appeal of a Charlie Chaplin of yore. Perhaps humour serves an evolutionary purpose, for it surely undertakes a number of psychological functions, which have likely contributed to our survival as a species be it in increasing social communication, influence, tension relief or coping with adversity.

Humour is a mode of ***interpersonal communication*** that is used for the transmission of messages in an indirect manner that may impact people in various ways. It is a useful form of communication in situations where the usual mode of transmission would

be too confrontational, embarrassing, or disheartening. Humour is a form of social play that enables us to have fun and to derive emotional pleasure from incongruities. It provides a way to shift ***perspective*** on a stressful situation, comprehend it from a new and less threatening view. Hence the situation becomes more manageable and less stressful. (Kuiper, Martin, and Olinger, 1993; Martin et al, 1993). The personality differences that emerge due to differing humour styles have also been examined closely (Martin et al. 2003).

While humour is accepted to be an indicator of positive mental health worldwide (Paul et al, 1986) with studies having found a positive relationship between happiness and humour, the use of humour as the ***differentiator*** between happy and unhappy people is much less. Studies show a frequent use of humour for negative and stressful situations by happy people than by unhappy ones (Lyubomirsky and Tucker, 1998). With humour people experience positive emotions and therefore show greater cognitive flexibility, enabling more creative problem solving; more efficient organization; more effective thinking, planning and more prosocial behaviours such as helpfulness and generosity (Isen et al 1972; Lyubomirsky, King, and Diener, 2005). Humour is believed to replace the feeling of anxiety, depression, or anger that would otherwise occur, enabling the person to think more broadly and engaging in creative problem solving (Fredrickson, 2001). This may also have physiological benefits by speeding up recovery from cardiovascular effects evoked by

negative stress-related emotion (Fredrickson and Levenson, 1998). Thus, humour can be categorised as an important emotion regulation mechanism and also a cognitive frame, which can contribute to mental health (Gross and Mufioz, 1995). Work on assessing the effect of humour and aerobic exercise on the state anxiety of young women showed that immediate psychological benefits of humour were comparable to that of aerobic exercises (Szabo et al, 2005).

Forgiveness: The balm that soothes

According to Peterson and Seligman, (2004) humour and forgiveness are two fulcrums of Positive psychology. Thus studying to understand and explore positive psychology becomes imperative. Forgiveness is defined as “*to excuse for a fault or offense; pardon*” and “*to renounce anger or resentment against*” (American Heritage Dictionary, 1985). It is also defined as the *framing of a perceived transgression such that one’s responses to the transgressor, transgression, and sequelae of the transgression are transformed from negative to neutral or positive; wherein source of a transgression, and therefore the object of forgiveness, maybe oneself, another person or persons, or a situation that one views as being beyond anyone’s control* (e.g., an illness, “fate,” or a natural disaster) (Thompson, Snyder, Hoffman et al., 2005).

There are multiple dimensions of forgiveness, it not a unilateral concept. Forgiveness of others, of oneself and situations being three aspects which together make up the construct. Forgiveness of oneself involves changes in one's cognitions while the other types of forgiveness can be of other individuals and their actions. Strong relations are seen between

forgiveness of self and aspects of mental health such as depression, anxiety, and anger (Mauger et al., 1992). When people forgive they acknowledge the transgression and engage cognitively, emotionally and behaviourally to bring a newer and positive understanding. Thus they construct a new narrative where the implications of their portrayals are seen in a different light (Rowe et al., 1989). Research has shown that the victim’s forgiveness of an offender is determined by the victim’s ability to make more positive, or less negative, attributions of the offender’s behavior.

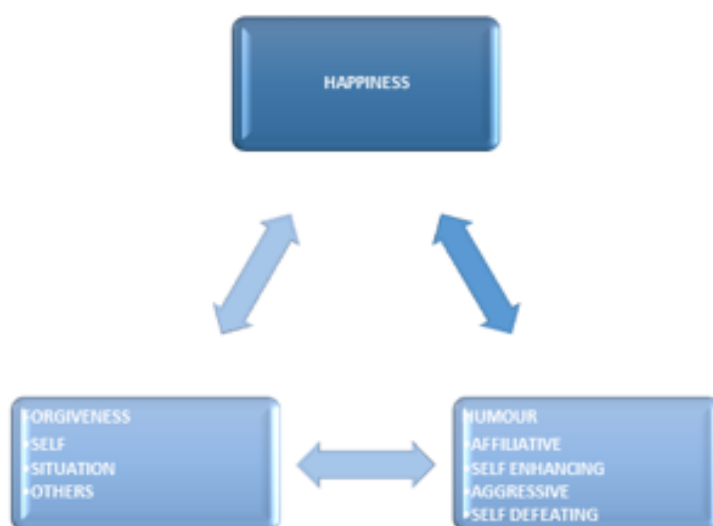
The relationship between forgiveness of self, forgiveness of others, and personality and general health measures shows that failure to forgive oneself is related to personality and general health scores that reflect individual psychopathology, with men and women scoring higher in neuroticism, depression and anxiety. Failure to forgive others is accompanied by higher depression scores among people (Maltby, Macaskill & Day, 2001). Also narcissism, neuroticism, anger, anxiety, depression, hostility, and resentment have all been associated with low levels of forgiveness (Ashton et al., 1998; Davenport, 1991; Davidson, 1993; Enright et al., 1992; Kaplan, 1992; Worthington, 1998; Williams and Williams, 1993). Happiness is a form of human contentment and if forgiveness is a reflection of the human strength and positive thinking we can draw a relation between forgiveness and happiness.

Humour and Forgiveness: Together shaping Happiness

The two constructs under study have long been examined in the realm of positive psychology. Their effects on happiness, individual and group behaviours have been studied closely.

Yet together their effect on happiness and well-being is not examined - with the imperative question being whether one is the antecedent or consequence of the other. Research has also found correlations between the two constructs, but not their effect on happiness.

Among the dimensions of humour, self-enhancing humour has been found to be positively correlated with perspective-taking empathy and aggressive humour has been found to be negatively correlated with it. Thus self-enhancing humour is positively correlated with forgiveness and aggressive humour negatively correlated with forgiveness. Studies done to study the relationship between forgiveness and the preferred humour style show that the self-enhancing humour was significantly and positively correlated with all of the forgiveness measures while aggressive humour and self-defeating humour were significantly and negatively correlated with some of the forgiveness measures and affiliative humour was not significantly correlated with any of the forgiveness measures (Martin et al, 2003). Happiness can be perceived as the ultimate form of contentment and forgiveness too is a human strength that leads to contentment and relief. Shaking off one's troubles and amusing oneself in incongruent situations gives another type of happiness. Therefore the relation between these three variables opens the avenues for further study and it becomes imperative to study the role of forgiveness and humour in shaping happiness. The variables of study can thus be conceptualized as depicted below.



Diagrammatic representation of relation between Happiness, Humour and Forgiveness styles

METHOD

Sample

The sample comprised of 100 (50 males and 50 females) Delhi based students aged from 18 to 24, with a mean age of 19.93 years (SD= 1.35). All the participants were undergraduate or postgraduate students studying professional and academic courses from Delhi.

Materials

All respondents completed a set of questionnaires which were:

Humour styles questionnaire: (Martin et. al, 2003) is a 32 item scale. It measures the four humour style, affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive and self-defeating humour through a 7 point Likert scale. There are 8 items for each style. Items from each of the sub-scale are affiliative (e.g. *I rarely make other people laugh by telling funny stories about myself.*), self-enhancing (e.g. *If I am feeling depressed, I can usually cheer myself up with humour*), aggressive (e.g. *If someone makes a mistake, I will often tease them about it*) and self-defeating (e.g. *I let people laugh at me or make*

Fig No.1

fun at my expense more than I should). Its internal consistencies i.e. Cronbach's alpha ranged from .77 to .81.

Subjective happiness scale: (Lyubomirsky and Lepper, 1997) is a 4 item scale. The range of scores is from 1 to 7 with higher score implying higher happiness. The Cronbach's alpha reliability score was found to range between 0.79 to 0.94 (M= 0.96). The test-retest reliability was found to range between 0.55 to 0.90.

The Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS): (Thompson and Synder, 1999) is an 18 item scale. It has three sub-scales with six questions each. The items are marked on a 1 to 7 likert scale. Reverse scoring is done for some of the questions. The three subscales are on forgiveness of self (e.g. *I hold grudges against myself for negative things I've done*), forgiveness of others (*I continue to be hard on others who have hurt me*) and forgiveness of situations (*I eventually make peace with bad situations in my life*).

Procedure

Participants from Delhi NCR of the age group 18-24 years with a mean age of 19.93 years (SD= 1.35) were invited to fill the forms on a voluntary basis. The questionnaire was divided into three parts and it took approximately five minutes to fill it. All three questionnaires were administered to all participants. Informed consent was taken and participants assured that results would not be divulged or used for commercial purposes,

Data- Analysis

Pearson correlations were used to determine the relations among the HSQ, HFS and happiness. The collected data was put into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences

(SPSS 21) for further analysis by using one way ANOVA.

Results

The study aimed at studying the relationship between humour styles, dispositional forgiveness styles and happiness and the gender differences that occur in these three constructs. Table-1 shows the use of 4 different humour styles in both the genders. In order to find differences in gender one-way ANOVA was used. Significant gender differences appeared in the use of Affiliative humour style $F(1,98)=.975^{**}$, $p<0.01$ showing a significant difference among the two genders in affiliative style of humour. Significant gender differences were also obtained in the use of Self-Enhancing humour style $F(1,98)=.928$, $p<0.01$. These results point to the significant differences in the use of self-enhancing humours by gender, which in turn could be attributed to socialization patterns and gender conditioning rampant in our society where females are supposed to be the 'weaker sex' and thus are likely to be less aggressive in their outlook. These findings are also recorded in the psychology of gender, passive aggressive style are much more likely with women as compared to men (Berger, 2010).

Significant differences at $p<.05$ have been obtained for self defeating humour style $F(1,98)=4.12$, $P<0.05$, This indicates that males use self-defeating humour more than women. These findings are in line with previous research on gender where males have been found to score higher as compared to women on aggressive and self-defeating styles of humour (Liu, 2012). According to Martin, Doris, Larsen, Gray and Weir, (2003) males scored higher than females on aggressive and self-defeating humour. Table-2 shows the use

of dispositional forgiveness styles in both the genders. In order to find differences in gender one-way ANOVA was used. Significant gender differences appeared in the practice of self-forgiveness $F(1,98)=6.278$, $p<0.05$ and tendency to forgive others $F(1,98)=7.665$, $p<0.01$. No significant gender differences were found in the tendencies to forgive difficult events or situations showing that as a construct, forgiveness is not determined by gender but rather is a function of perspective taking of a particular situation (Martin & Lefcourt, 1983). Pearson's correlations were computed between dispositional forgiveness styles and various types of humour styles (Table-3). Significant correlation was found in the use of self-forgiveness and affiliative humour styles $r(98)=.290$, $p<.01$, self-forgiveness and self-enhancing humour styles $r(98)=.335$, $p<.01$ and self-forgiveness and Self-defeating humour styles $r(98)=-.210$, $p<.05$. Significant correlation was found in the use of forgiving situations and self-enhancing humour styles $r(98)=.219$, $p<.05$. Significant correlation was also found in total forgiveness and affiliative humour styles $r(98)=.209$, $p<.05$ and self-forgiveness and self-enhancing humour styles $r(98)=.219$, $p<.05$.

The negative correlation between self-defeating style of humour and self-forgiveness is in line with theoretical treatises of positive psychology and corroborates how self-defeatist perceptions and perspectives taking can shape our behaviours, reiterating the importance and connection between self-disparaging humour and self-forgiveness. To further test and map out the difference and link between these two constructs with overall happiness, correlations were computed. Results are tabulated in Table No. 5 & 6 and yield distinct insights. Pearson's

correlations were also computed between happiness and various types of humour styles (Table-4). Significant positive correlations were found between happiness, affiliative $r(98)=.379$, $p<.01$ and self-enhancing humour styles $r(98)=.467$, $p<.01$. Results albeit on a smaller sample, point to the associations between being happy and the ability to use more connected and positive styles of humour. These could lead to further research avenues where the style adopted in a particular situation could predict happiness. Stronger positive correlations are obtained between happiness and dispositional forgiveness styles of self and situation based forgiveness. (Table-5). Significant correlation was found between happiness and self-forgiveness $r(98)=.506$, $p<.01$. Happiness and forgiving situations $r(98)=.285$, $p<.01$ and happiness and total forgiveness $r(98)=.396$, $p<.01$. The correlations are indicative of a relationship between the differing humour styles and forgiveness dispositions and their effect as '*predictors*' of happiness. These results point to further avenues for research which could have serious implications for the field of positive psychology. The research with its limited sample size is indicative and may require further validation studies to give rise to theoretical formulations.

Discussion

While Humour has been called '*the enjoyment of incongruity*', forgiveness is the balm that allows healing to occur. Together these shape the experience of joy and happiness. The study looked at gender differences among the sample (N=100) and found distinct patterns which need closer examination. The high correlations among the two (forgiveness and humour) point to a gestalt which hitherto has not been

examined in the positive psychology milieu. If distinct styles yield to distinct patterns, perhaps happiness could also be predicted by examining the style of humour and forgiveness. Insight into such patterns would help build the body of research and understanding in positive psychology. This would also help predict anomalous cognitions and allow training and reframing of situations to help better coping.

These findings can be corroborated in the light of extant work which shows a negative relation between use of affiliative humour incidents of depression and anxiety. The use of self-defeating humour is negatively related to depression, anxiety and higher chances of suffering from psychotic disorders. Affiliative humour style is displayed when one is with others, while self-enhancing is shown when one is alone (Martin & Lefcourt, 1983). Both aggressive and self-defeating humour styles occur in social situations and share an impulsive element.

Gender differences similar to these are also obtained in the relationship between social self-image and sense of humour. On the three-dimensions of “funny” wit, “sarcastic” wit, and “mixed” wit, results show that the social self-image of college women was more towards the “funny” style as compared to college males who used more “sarcastic” wit. “Mixed” wit was found in college males and teacher females. Through this study, differences in development trends could also be seen from adolescence to adulthood as the females changed from “funny” to “mixed” wit while males changed from “mixed” to “sarcastic” wit.

Cross culturally also similar gender differences were found among undergraduate students (N=232) across 6 undergraduate Universities in

Hong Kong. (Liu,2012). Results showed that males considered themselves as more humorous than females, they also used more aggressive humour styles as compared to females of similar ages with higher degrees of positive correlations being obtained among adaptive humour styles, self-esteem and subjective happiness. The significant relationship between humour styles, self-esteem and subjective happiness has been reiterated in multiple research works by Martin, Doris, Larsen, Gray and Weir, (2003) wherein males scored higher than females on aggressive and self-defeating humour. Overall these findings show a difference between the two genders, not in humour per se but rather the particular humour style adopted. Such differences could be attributed to the larger pattern of socialization and learning. Years of conditioning in a particular style of self-deprecating humour makes for an inability to don the ‘*la vie en rose*’ lenses.

‘No Laughing Matter’: Implications of Findings

The gender differences in the research point to highly probable and examinable aspects of the two constructs and their relationship with happiness. When humour allows us to forgive does happiness emerge? Or do the humour and forgiveness style we employ makes us self-destruct? So if gender differences exist, attributable to socialization patterns which in turn can be modulated as years of conditioning wear off.

The inherently intuitive nature of humour shows a cognitive bias which makes us believe something is funny or something is not forgivable. Each of these has major implications for the subjective experience of happiness. It allows for a more agentic role to

the individual beyond gender where both humour and forgiveness are required for evolving into a happier version of oneself. This is witnessed in the number of laughter clubs, medical clowning at hospitals and gratitude journals that help people seek solace and

healing, be it from somatic ailments as post cardiovascular interventions or more psychological healing. To conclude, an insight into these patterns would help enhance the depth of what is known about happiness and ways to increase it.

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APPENDIX:

TABLE-1

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) by Gender for different Humour Styles

Variable	MEAN		STANDARD DEVIATION		F(3,50)		Eta Squared
	FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE	MALE	F	Significance	
Affiliation	38.54	38.58	7.32	5.08	.001**	0.000	
Self-Enhancing	35.50	35.66	7.14	10.17	.008**	0.000	
Aggressive	28.06	29.94	5.69	7.15	2.114	0.021	
Self-defeating	31.52	35.20	8.054	9.97	4.12*	0.040	

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

TABLE-2

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) by Gender for Dispositional Forgiveness Styles

VARIABLE	MEAN		STANDARD DEVIATION		F(2,50)	Eta Squared
	FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE	MALE		
Self-forgiveness	29.90	27.22	4.39	6.16	6.278*	0.060
Forgiving others	25.36	28.24	6.16	6.28	7.655**	0.072
Forgiving situations	28.24	27.74	3.54	7.67	0.543	0.006

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

TABLE-3***Correlation between Humour Styles and Dispositional Forgiveness Styles***

	Affiliation	Self-Enhancing	Aggressive	Self-defeating
Self-forgiveness	.290**	.355**	0.001	-.210*
Forgiving others	0.134	0.164	-0.127	0.111
Forgiving situations	0.045	.219*	-0.150	-0.087
Total forgiveness	.209*	.334**	-0.127	-0.087

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

TABLE-4***Correlation between Happiness and various types of Humour Styles***

	Affiliation	Self Enhancing	Aggressive	Self defeating
Happiness	.379**	.467**	0.124	-0.106

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

TABLE-5***Correlation between Happiness and various Dispositional Forgiveness styles***

	Self-Forgiveness	Forgiving others	Forgiving situations	Total forgiveness
Happiness	.506**	0.078	.285**	.396**

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).