

Dark Humour and Personality Correlates

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The present study aims to explore the relationship between personality and dark humour, i.e. a form of humour that turns human suffering into a joke, and deals with distressing subjects like disease, deformity, handicap, suicide or violence with bitter amusement. For the purpose of the study, a sample comprising of 50 participants, within the age range of 17-25 years from Delhi- NCR and Mumbai, was selected through convenience sampling. An inventory of dark humorous video clippings and comic strips was prepared and its validity was ensured through inter-rater agreement. Participants were asked to provide a preference rating on this five-point inventory scale. For assessing personality, NEO- FFI was used. A correlational analysis was then conducted to examine the association between personality dimensions and appreciation of dark humour. Results indicate that preference for dark humour is positively correlated with the personality dimensions of extraversion and openness to experience, and negatively correlated with neuroticism. Findings are discussed in the light of broader theoretical framework of personality theories.

Keywords: dark humour, personality traits, black comedy, humour

Introduction

Humour can be conceptualised as a habitual behaviour pattern with the general tendency to laugh or tell funny stories. The formal enquiry into humour started with the study of individual differences in styles of humour i.e. habitual humour-related behaviour patterns. Since the early 1980s, much of research has focused on trying to understand the potential beneficial effects of humour on physical and psychosocial well-being. With the emergence of 'positive psychology,' which focuses on adaptive strengths such as optimism, faith, and courage, interest in the study of humour is likely to continue (Martin, Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003).

Several theoretical perspectives have been used to examine humour. Biological, instinct and evolution theories describe laughter as a universal phenomenon that appears early in life before any complex cognitive processes have been formed. McDougal (1903) conceptualised it as an instinct. He believed that without a sense of the ludicrous, which was nature's antidote for minor depressing and disagreeable spectacles, humankind might not have survived. On the other hand, McComas (1923) and Hayworth (1928) believe that laughter served communication functions in pre-lingual times, wherein it was meant to indicate good news. Superiority theories believe that laughter evolved through elation felt during our triumph over others. Surprise theories hold that elements of 'surprise,' and 'shock,' are necessary (although not sufficient)

conditions for humour experience. Furthermore, release and relief theories hold that humour helps provide relief from strain or constrain. From a psychoanalytic point of view, humour saves the expenditure of psychic energy. When energy is built up for occupation in certain psychic channels (cathexis) and cannot be utilized (due to the censoring of action by the superego), it may instead be discharged as laughter, which is a form of pleasure (Goldstein, 1972).

Humour can also be classified into various categories. The popular forms of humour are observational comedy (pokes fun at everyday life), insult comedy (wherein offensive insults are directed at the performer's audience and/or other performers), cringe comedy (deals with embarrassing moments), satires (make fun of someone in a sarcastic way), blue comedy (deals with comic content that borders on gross indecency), and parody (making fun of original works). In recent years, there has been an upsurge in the phenomena of Black Comedy or dark humour. This term is used by various writers to refer to humour that is grotesque, macabre, sick, pornographic, ironic, satirical, absurd, morbid, etc. The 1975 edition of the New Columbia Encyclopaedia, defines dark humour as "grotesque or morbid humour used to express the absurdity, insensitivity, paradox, and cruelty of modern world" (Bloom, 2010). Willinger et al. (2017) describes dark humour as a kind of humour that treats sinister subjects like death, disease, deformity, handicap or warfare with bitter amusement (Mindess et al. 1985; Baldick 2001), and presents such tragic,

distressing or morbid topics in humorous terms (Oxford dictionaries, 2016). For e.g., ‘Why did Hitler commit suicide? Because he saw the gas bill.’ O’Neil in his writings in 1980s argues that dark humour,

“allows us to envisage the facelessness of the void and yet be able to laugh rather than despair. Entropic humour, which in the end is seen to be simply an intensification of the disturbing dynamics common to all humour, comes in many shapes and forms, and our laughter may contain many degrees of bitterness and hollowness, mirthlessness and parody and pain, but in the end- we do laugh, and while we laugh there’s hope” (Bloom, 2010, p. 79).

Recent research in the area of humour has tried to establish links between humour and personality. It has been found that extraversion, agreeableness, and openness are positively associated with self-enhancing humour, while aggressive and self-defeating humour is found to be negatively correlated with agreeableness and conscientiousness but positively correlated with neuroticism (Greengross & Miller, 2008; Martin et al., 2003; and Vernon, Martin, Schermer, & Mackie, 2008). Veselkaa et al. (2010) showed that participants who obtained higher scores on sub-clinical psychopathy and Machiavellianism were more likely to make use of negative humour styles such as aggressive and self-defeating humour, while individuals who obtained higher scores on narcissism were more inclined towards positive affiliative humour style. Martina et al. (2012) replicated the results. Willinger et al. (2017) explored the relationship between dark humour and intelligence and educational levels, and found that subjects who prefer this form of humour are high in intelligence, have higher education levels and show lowest values regarding mood disturbance and aggression.

People typically seek pleasure and avoid pain. However, there is a lack of enquiry in the area of how disturbing or painful topics can also be pleasurable. Research in the area of humour is not considered a respectable endeavour, despite humour having some practical implications in terms of promoting general wellbeing, health, and reduction of stress. Not only this, there are observable personality patterns amongst people who prefer different kinds of humour. Therefore, undertaking research exploring the personality traits of people who prefer particular forms of humour becomes pertinent. Against this backdrop, after thorough literature review, it was observed that there was a particular lack of research

exploring the links between dark humour and personality. The *rationale of the study* thus lies in filling this gap in literature. Also, both researchers find humour, in particular, dark humour, gratifying. Thus the *objective of study* is to explore the relationship between preference for dark humour and the BIG Five personality dimensions.

Method

Participants

For the purpose of the study, a sample of 50 participants, consisting of 21 males and 29 females, in the age group of 17-25 years (mean age=19.74) was drawn from two metropolitan cities – Delhi-NCR and Mumbai. The sample was drawn using convenience/incidental sampling. It is a non-random probability sampling technique wherein participants are selected according to convenience. Incidental sampling is used whenever there is no ready sampling frame from which participants can be selected. One condition for selection of sample was that the participants were well versed with English language, as the items on the self-report inventories were in English.

Measures

For the purpose of the study, literature review exploring the ideas of humour, personality traits, and black comedy, was undertaken. An extensive reservoir of dark humorous content, consisting of comic strips, jokes, and videos, was collected. This reservoir, in the form of a Google form, was sent to 14 professional comedians, five of who practice the style of dark humour. The experts were asked to rate the items on a five-point rating scale - Not humorous at all, No dark humour at all, A little bit dark, Dark humour and Very dark humour, to distinguish dark humorous content from other forms of humour. Based on expert ratings, fifteen items consisting of six jokes, six videos, and three comic strips with the highest inter-rater agreement on ‘very dark humour’ rating were selected for inclusion in the inventory. The inventory was developed for presentation to the participants with a five-point rating scale – 1-Not funny at all; 2- Not very funny, 3- Somewhat funny, 4- Quite funny, and 5- Exceptionally funny. The inventory was pilot tested with two participants and their suggestions, e.g., to incorporate videos in between jokes instead of showing them separately at the end, were taken into account to make necessary changes in the humour inventory. The inventory’s reliability, assessed using Cronbach’s alpha, was found to be .91.

The NEO-Five Factor Inventory developed by Costa & McCrae (1991) was chosen for a comprehensive assessment of the Big Five Factors of Personality. The 60-item test has a five-point rating scale - Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, and Strongly Agree. Internal consistency for the NEO-FFI scales, calculated using coefficient alpha, have been reported to be .86, .77, .73, .68, and .81 for N, E, O, A, and C domains, respectively (Costa & McCrae, 1991). The convergent correlations range from 0.56 to 0.62; none of the divergent correlations exceeds 0.20 (Costa & McCrae, 1991).

Demographics of the participants, including name (optional), age, gender, and qualification, were included, and a form, seeking consent of the participants for the present study, was created. It informed the participants about the research study and reassured them of that would be anonymised and confidential.

Procedure

The dark humour inventory was administered to 50 participants. Consent was sought from each participant and adequate amount of time was spent on rapport formation. The humour inventory was shown to participants in the form of a PowerPoint presentation (PPT) on a laptop. Sufficient time was provided to the participants to respond to each item on the humour inventory. After filling the humour inventory, the participants were asked to complete the NEO-FFI. The two inventories were individually scored and the data thus obtained was analysed using SPSS. The mean and standard deviation for scores on humour inventory, and for each dimension of personality tested in NEO-FFI, was obtained. Furthermore, data was analysed using bivariate correlation (Pearson's r). The results were recorded in data tables 1 and 2, and later discussed in the light of previous research studies and broader theoretical framework on personality and humour.

Results

Table 1: Mean and SD of scores on dark humour inventory and the Big Five dimensions of personality

	Mean	SD
Humour Inventory	47.42	12.41
Openness	32.80	5.47
Conscientiousness	32.46	7.90
Extraversion	28.06	8.41
Agreeableness	28.84	6.34
Neuroticism	24.16	8.99

Table 2: Correlation between total score obtained on dark humour inventory and the Big Five dimensions of personality

Dimension	Appreciation of dark humour	p-value
Neuroticism	-.376**	.007
Extraversion	.308*	.030
Openness	.361*	.010
Agreeableness	-.225	.116
Conscientiousness	.201	.162

* $p < .05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Discussion

Dark humour is a form of humour that turns human suffering into a joke. It deals with distressing subjects like death, disease, deformity, handicap or warfare with bitter amusement (Mindess et al. 1985; Baldick 2001). Also referred to as black comedy or gallows humour, it is a kind of humour that is grotesque, sick, pornographic, absurd, etc. Dark humour includes content on death, disease, misfortune (especially of innocent people), rape, mental illnesses, disability, terrorism, natural disasters, mass shootings, to name a few. It makes it possible to have an open discussion of deeply disturbing issues of the society. People are more likely to listen to someone making them laugh, than cry; hence, comedy is an acceptable form to prompt this discussion. Anthony Jeselnik, a famous dark humourist, points out that dark humour is not about being dark for the sake of being dark. It is rather to acknowledge society in the face of dark topics that are absurd, morbid.

The study employed a dark humour inventory consisting of 15 items (including jokes, comic strips, videos) with a 5-point rating scale. Total scores obtained on this inventory range from 25 to 69 with a mean score of 47.42 and a standard deviation of 12.41. The 60-item NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI), developed by Costa and McCrae (1991), was chosen to provide a quick and reliable measure of the Big Five personality dimensions of neuroticism, extraversion, openness, conscientiousness and agreeableness. A correlational analysis of the two variables was undertaken to ascertain the possible association between personality traits and a general appreciation of dark humorous content.

Neuroticism (N) ($M = 24.16$, $SD = 8.99$) is the tendency of the participants to experience negative emotions and psychological distress in response to stressors. The present study found a significant negative correlation ($r = -.376$; $p < .01$) between preference for dark humour and neuroticism suggesting that individuals high on neuroticism are likely to find dark humorous content emotionally disturbing. Hence, these individuals are less likely to appreciate dark humour as it expresses disconcerting issues and dares the absurdity of the modern life that may provoke their negative emotions. Also, it is possible that negative emotions interfere with people's ability to comprehend the joke and lead to a lack of appreciation. Similar results were found in the study conducted by Willinger et al. (2017) who found that subjects who present high levels of aggressiveness are more likely to dislike black humour and have lower black humour comprehension

than subjects with low aggression values. Researchers suggested that being able to appreciate dark humour was a complex "information-processing task", and higher levels of aggressiveness and associated arousal lead to decreased levels of pleasure when reading black humorous content.

The second domain, Extraversion (E) ($M = 28.06$, $SD = 8.41$) measures the degree of sociability, positive emotionality, and general activity among participants. A positive correlation ($r = .308$; $p < .05$) was found between preference for dark humour and extraversion. High extraversion means that the person has positive emotionality, better emotional stability, and less mood disturbance. Support for this positive correlation can be found in the study conducted by Willinger et al. (2017) who found that people who enjoy dark humour score low on measures of mood disturbances and aggression. An extraverted person is less likely to be repulsed by disturbing content, as he/she tends to focus more on positive emotions, like subtler aspects of comedy in case of black humour. Furthermore, as humour is a means to decrease the social distance between two individuals (Graham, 1995), extraverts who prefer interacting with others naturally gravitate to all its forms in order to exploit this social capital. Individuals high on extraversion also like stimulation. The thrill in making fun of and understanding the same about absurd, morbid, disturbing and insensitive issues might help stimulate such individuals.

Openness to experience (O) ($M = 32.80$, $SD = 5.47$) assesses the levels of curiosity, independent judgment, and conservativeness of the participants. The present study found a positive correlation ($r = .361$; $p < .05$) between preference for dark humour and openness. Research data supports this finding that affiliative and self-enhancing humour styles have been positively associated with the basic personality traits of openness (e.g. Greengross & Miller, 2008; Martin et al., 2003; Vernon, Martin, Schermer, & Mackie, 2008). Individuals high on this domain are usually keen to experience both positive and negative emotions. Openness to experience is also related to education and measured intelligence, especially divergent thinking skills. Such individuals are also highly creative, imaginative beings. Being high on intelligence, they show preference for and enjoyment of dark humour more than other individuals (Willinger et al., 2017). Another possible explanation for this could be that persons high on this domain are not conservative in their outlook. They may be open to unconventional ideas and values. It might, therefore,

be easy for them to accept this kind of humour, thereby enjoying it more.

Agreeableness (A) (M = 28.84, SD = 6.34), the fourth dimension of NEO-FFI, measures the altruistic, sympathetic, and cooperative tendencies of the participants in the study. Through this research, a negative correlation ($r = -.225$, $p > .05$) was found, which was not significant. Individuals low on agreeableness are hardheaded, not very sympathetic to others around them, and less moved by appeals to pity. Being less sympathetic, the morbid, sometimes painful content involved in dark humour might not be experienced as psychologically distressing. Instead, it might be seen as enjoyable. Persons who score low on this domain are also cynical in nature. Cynicism and sarcasm are also facets of dark humour. Therefore, the two variables may be expected to have a negative correlation but the present study was unable to find a significant relationship between preference for dark humour and agreeableness.

Conscientiousness (C) (M = 32.46, SD = 7.90) assesses the participant's level of self-control in planning and organization. The present study indicated a positive correlation ($r = .201$, $p > .05$) between preference for dark humour and conscientiousness, which was not significant. Conscientious individuals are determined, strong-willed, with high academic and occupational achievement. This domain measures the tendency of a person to act in socially acceptable ways. Enjoyment of dark humour involves cognitive and emotional processing of the content. Therefore, this may be unrelated to the behavioural tendency assessed by the personality dimension of conscientiousness. Conscientiousness might sometimes include perfectionist tendencies in people. A research found that other-oriented perfectionists display an aggressive sense of humour and might enjoy jokes at the expense of others (Joachim, 2015). However, the present study failed to replicate the findings.

To conclude, it was observed that a significant positive correlation exists between preference for dark humour and extraversion, which means that an

extraverted person may be less likely to be repulsed by the dark content of humour as he/she may focus more on its positive aspects. A significant positive correlation between dark humour and openness to experience was also found. Individuals high on this domain tend to be more intelligent, and higher intelligence has been found to be associated with enjoyment of dark humour. On the other hand, a negative correlation was found between neuroticism and preference for dark humour. A possible explanation is that dark humour can provoke negative emotions among people who experience high psychological distress. Finally, no significant relationship was found between preference for dark humour and personality dimensions of agreeableness and conscientiousness.

Implications, Limitations and Directions for Future Use

The research data can be used for identifying the target audience for dark humorous content. The data also allows us to explore the possible reasons for the preference in general populace for such humour, thereby allowing us to explore the role that humour may play in the lives of people.

This study was conducted on a small sample size and used a convenience-sampling technique, which allows for exploration of important insights into personality correlates and dark humorous content, but which also significantly limits the scope of generalization of results. Further, the sample comprised mainly of urban educated youth from Delhi-NCR and Mumbai. For future studies, selection of a more inclusive sample is desirable. This study only contains a self-reported measure of appreciation of humorous content and doesn't use an observer rating system. Future studies could record individual's reactions to the items on dark humour inventory to supplement the results. It is noted that in recent years there has been an upsurge in dark humorous content, therefore, future studies can also conduct a comparative analysis between the younger and older generations to understand the causes of changing preference for humour content.

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