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Humor styles, self-efficacy and prosocial tendencies in middle adolescents

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Abstract

This study explored humor styles, prosocial tendencies, and empathic/social self-efficacy in 302 Italian middle adolescents. We used Humor Styles Questionnaire (Penzo et al., 2011), Empathic and Social Self-efficacy Scales (Caprara et al., 2001), and Prosocial Tendencies Measure (Carlo & Randall, 2002). Results: affiliative and self-enhancing humor positively correlated with empathic/social self-efficacy, while self-defeating humor negatively correlated with social self-efficacy. Helping behavior in emotionally critical and dire situations positively correlated with empathic/social self-efficacy and, only for boys, with affiliative humor. Moreover, public and anonymous prosocial tendencies negatively correlated with affiliative humor. Differences for sex and age emerged.

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1. Introduction

Humor is a many-sided phenomenon generally referred to actions or stories perceived as funny and generating laughs or smiles, linked to cognitive ability that permits to produce or understand jokes or witticism (Feingold & Mazzella, 1993) and that could be considered a strategy that favors personal well-being and positive social interactions (Penzo, Giannetto, Stefanile, & Sirigatti, 2011; Zhao, Kong, & Wang, 2012).

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Martin and his colleagues (2003) distinguished four humor styles connected to positive or negative ways in which humor was typically used in everyday life. According to this model, positive styles were functional to reach personal well-being (self-enhancing style) and facilitate social relations (affiliative style) while negative styles were considered potentially detrimental for oneself (self-defeating style) or other people (aggressive style). Affiliative humor was linked to the tendency to tell jokes, humorous stories, and witticisms in order to amuse the others and favour interpersonal relationships; self-enhancing humor was referred to the use of humor as a coping strategy and to the tendency to find a humorous point of view in stressing situations; aggressive humor was linked to the inclination to use humor to improve one's own personal image damaging the others through sarcasm and teasing; self-defeating humor was referred to amuse the others at one's own expense, showing ridiculous behaviors or telling funny stories about oneself. Scholars underlined positive relationships between affiliative and self-enhancing humor and self-esteem, optimism, well-being and social intimacy (Martin et al., 2003; Erickson & Feldstein, 2006; Penzo et al., 2011; Leist & Muller, 2013). In addition, negative correlations between self-enhancing humor and depression symptoms and positive correlations between self-defeating humor and depression symptoms were found (Dozois, Martin & Bieling, 2009). Moreover, in the analysis of relationships among humor, emotional intelligence and social competence, Yip & Martin (2006) pointed out negative relationships between aggressive and self-defeating humor and the ability to perceive emotions and, on the contrary, positive relationships between affiliative and self-enhancing humor and social competence.

Additionally, researchers pointed out significant differences for sex and age in the inclination to use the four humor styles. In detail, Martin et al. (2003) noticed that male undergraduate students scored higher than female students in all humor styles, especially in aggressive humor. Other researches carried out with university students (Yip & Martin, 2006) and adolescents (Penzo et al., 2011) confirmed that males expressed more than females the inclination to use aggressive humor without significant differences for the other humor styles.

Little evidences in international research were found in regard to the relationships among the four humor styles, perceived empathic and social self-efficacy, and prosocial tendencies.

Perceived self-efficacy concerns beliefs about the individual abilities to structure and execute actions to organize and control social and personal situations (Bandura, 1986), through consciousness of personal limits and possibilities (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy beliefs are referred to specific domains of the individual's psychological and social functioning; in detail, the perceived empathic self-efficacy (see Caprara, 2001) consists of beliefs about one's personal ability to understand feelings and needs of the others, while the social self-efficacy regards the beliefs about the individual ability to play an active role in relationships with other people.

The exploration of prosocial tendencies, originally developed by Carlo & Randall (2002), is linked to the inclination to help the others in various social and psychological conditions (anonymous, public, emotional, compliant, dire, and altruistic behavior). In a sample of Italian adolescents, De Caroli & Sagone (in press) identified a three-factorial structure of prosocial tendencies: 1) helping behavior in emotionally critical and dire situations, regarding the inclination to help the others under emotionally evocative, emergency or crisis situations; 2) public prosocial behavior, concerning behaviors directed to benefit other people in the presence of the others; 3) anonymous prosocial behavior, defined as inclination to help the others without other people's knowledge. De Caroli & Sagone (in press) found significant relationships between empathic, interpersonal communication and problem solving self-efficacy and helping behavior in emotionally critical and dire situations.

2. Methodology

2.1. Purpose of study

The main purpose of this research was to explore the correlations between the four humor styles, perceived empathic and social self-efficacy, and the prosocial tendencies. In addition, sex and age differences in the analyzed dimensions were studied.

2.2. Participants

The sample consisted of 302 Italian middle adolescents (165 boys and 137 girls), randomly selected from four Public High Schools in Sicily (Italy). The age range of participants was between 14 and 19 years old ($M=16.19$, $sd=1.80$). Adolescents were divided into three age groups: gr.1 ($M=14.78$, $sd=.71$), gr.2 ($M=16.61$, $sd=.75$), and gr.3 ($M=18.40$, $sd=.46$).

2.3. Measures and procedure

The Italian version of Humor Styles Questionnaire (Penzo et al., 2011) was used to assess the inclination to adopt the four humor styles. It was structured in 32 items, with response options on a 7-points Likert scale, articulated in four subscales linked to affiliative humor (e.g. “I laugh and joke a lot with my closest friends”; $\alpha=.71$), self-enhancing humor (e.g. “If I am feeling depressed, I can usually cheer myself up with humor”; $\alpha=.59$), aggressive humor (e.g. “If someone makes a mistake, I will often tease them about it”; $\alpha=.51$), and self-defeating humor (e.g. “I let people laugh at me or make fun at my expense more than I should”; $\alpha=.59$).

The Empathic and Social Self-efficacy Scales (Caprara, 2001) were employed to assess the perceived self-efficacy in the ability to understand feelings and emotions expressed by other people and the perception of one’s own ability to play an active role in relationships with other people. The first scale was constituted by 12 statements, evaluable on a 5-points Likert scale (from 1=totally unable to 5=totally capable): e.g. “how much do you think you’re able to understand if a person is sad or unhappy?” ($\alpha=.79$). The second one was formed by 15 statements, each evaluable in a 5-points scale (from 1=totally unable to 5=totally capable): e.g. “how much do you think you’re able to begin a conversation with a person who you don’t know very well?” ($\alpha=.81$).

The Prosocial Tendencies Measure (Carlo & Randall, 2002) was used to evaluate the tendencies to adopt prosocial behaviors in different conditions. In the Italian version proposed by De Caroli & Sagone (in press), the scale was composed by 22 items evaluable on a 5-points Likert scale ranging from 1 (does not describe me at all) to 5 intervals (describes me very well). It was possible to distinguish three factors: anonymous ($\alpha=.71$)(e.g. “I think that helping others without them knowing is the best type of situation”), public ($\alpha=.71$)(e.g. “I can help others best when people are watching me”), and helping behavior in emotionally critical and dire situations ($\alpha=.62$)(e.g., “I tend to help people who are in real crisis or need” and “I respond to helping others best when the situation is highly emotional”).

2.4. Data analysis

Statistical analyses were conducted applying t-tests, One Way Anova, and linear correlations using the SPSS 15.0 version (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). Sex and age groups were used as independent variables, whereas mean scores obtained on the four humor styles, empathic and social self-efficacy, and factors of prosocial tendencies were used as dependent variables.

3. Results

Descriptive analyses demonstrated that adolescents showed higher levels in affiliative ($M=44.63$, $sd=7.27$) than self-enhancing ($M=33.82$, $sd=7.11$), aggressive ($M=27.12$, $sd=6.45$), and self-defeating humor ($M=24.60$, $sd=7.32$)($F_{(3,299)}=529.43$, $p<.001$). Boys scored higher than girls in the disposition to use aggressive humor style ($M=28.53$, $sd=6.41$ vs. $M=25.41$, $sd=6.10$; $t_{(300)}=4.29$, $p<.001$): thus, boys tended to use humor as a strategy to improve the personal image by damaging the others more than girls did. Moreover, in relation to age-groups, significant differences emerged in the disposition to use self-defeating humor style: younger adolescents displayed to use humor to amuse the others at one’s own expense less than older ones, showing ridiculous behaviors or telling funny stories about themselves (gr.1: $M=23.42$, $sd=6.88$; gr.2: $M=25.18$, $sd=7.35$; gr.3: $M=25.88$, $sd=7.76$)($F_{(2,299)}=3.39$, $p=.03$).

According to self-efficacy standardized scores (Caprara, 2001), adolescents expressed high levels in social self-efficacy ($M=50.63$, $sd=7.02$) and low levels in empathic self-efficacy ($M=43.97$, $sd=6.67$), without significant differences for sex and age groups.

In relation to prosocial tendencies, adolescents were more inclined to adopt helping behaviors in emotionally critical and dire situations ($M=3.60$, $sd=.57$) than in anonymous ($M=2.47$, $sd=.87$) and public situations ($M=2.25$, $sd=.68$) ($F_{(2,300)}=318.49$, $p<.001$). Boys expressed lower levels than girls in the inclination to helping behavior in emotionally critical and dire situations ($M=3.53$, $sd=.60$ vs. $M=3.68$, $sd=.53$; $t_{(300)}=-2.14$, $p=.03$); on the contrary, boys expressed higher levels than girls in the use of prosocial behavior in public situations ($M=2.40$, $sd=.66$ vs. $M=2.06$, $sd=.68$; $t_{(300)}=4.34$, $p<.001$). In relation to age groups, younger adolescents scored lower than older ones in helping behavior in emotionally critical and dire situations (gr.1: $M=3.46$, $sd=.56$; gr.2: $M=3.67$, $sd=.56$; gr.3: $M=3.74$, $sd=.56$) ($F_{(2,299)}=7.62$, $p=.001$). On the contrary, younger adolescents showed higher levels than older ones in the inclination to use prosocial behavior in public condition (gr.1: $M=2.36$, $sd=.68$; gr.2: $M=2.16$, $sd=.65$; gr.3: $M=2.15$, $sd=.71$) ($F_{(2,299)}=3.19$, $p=.04$).

The analysis of linear correlations among humor styles and empathic and social self-efficacy underlined significant and positive relationships with differences for boys and girls. Thus, affiliative humor was positively related to empathic (for boys: $r=.33$, $p<.001$; for girls: $r=.25$, $p<.001$) and social self-efficacy (for boys: $r=.44$, $p<.001$; for girls: $r=.37$, $p<.001$) while self-defeating humor was negatively related to social self-efficacy (for boys: $r=-.24$, $p<.001$; for girls: $r=-.18$, $p=.04$); only for boys, self-enhancing humor was positively related to both empathic ($r=.21$, $p<.001$) and social self-efficacy ($r=.15$, $p=.05$).

In reference to prosocial tendencies, helping behavior in emotionally critical and dire situations was positively related to empathic self-efficacy (for boys: $r=.30$, $p<.001$; for girls: $r=.19$, $p=.02$) and social self-efficacy (for boys: $r=.28$, $p<.001$; for girls: $r=.22$, $p=.01$). It meant that the more the adolescents expressed prosocial behaviors in emotionally critical and dire situations the more they perceived themselves as able to understand feelings and needs of the others, and to play an active role in relationships with other people and vice versa.

With regard to relationships between humor styles and prosocial tendencies, results demonstrated that, only for boys, affiliative humor was positively related to helping behavior in emotionally critical and dire situations ($r=.33$, $p<.001$) and negatively to public ($r=-.29$, $p<.001$) and anonymous prosocial behaviors ($r=-.32$, $p<.001$).

4. Conclusions

The outcomes of the present study pointed out that Italian middle adolescents highly used the positive humor styles (affiliative and self-enhancing humor) and lowly the negative ones (aggressive and self-defeating humor). Boys displayed an inclination to improve their individual image using humor to jeer or tease the others more than girls and older adolescents tended to use mainly the self-defeating style. In addition, adolescents reported low levels in empathic self-efficacy and high levels in social self-efficacy. Finally, they tended to adopt mainly helping behavior in emotionally critical and dire situations, with differences for sex and age; thus, boys and younger adolescents were more inclined, than girls and older adolescents, to help other people in public situations, while girls and older adolescents were more inclined, than boys and younger adolescents, to help the others under emotionally evocative, emergency or crisis situations.

Significant relationships among humor styles, self-efficacy, and prosocial tendencies were observed with differences for sex. Thus, in line with the findings of Yip & Martin' study (2006), the more the adolescents were prone to amuse the others and favour interpersonal relationships the more they perceived themselves as efficient in understanding the feelings and needs of the others and in social relationships. Additionally, the more the boys used humor as a coping strategy in stressing situations, the more they perceived themselves as able to understand needs of the others also in social interactions. On the contrary, the more the adolescents tended to amuse the others at their own expense, the less they perceived themselves as active players in interpersonal relations. With references to prosocial tendencies, the more the adolescents tended to help other people in emotionally critical and dire situations, the more they perceived themselves as able in empathic and social circumstances. Additionally, the inclination to use humor to amuse the others and favour interpersonal relationships was positively related to helping behavior in emotionally critical and dire situations and negatively related to prosocial behavior in public and anonymous conditions.

One of the limits of the current study could be overcome selecting participants from different parts of the same country (Italy) to generalize the obtained results.

Future researches could analyze the developmental changes from infancy to adulthood in the relationships among humor styles, self-efficacy, and prosocial tendencies.

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