

# Correlations Between Humor Styles and Loneliness

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**ABSTRACT.** In a previous study, a significant negative correlation between shyness with affiliative humor and a significant positive one with self-defeating humor were reported. Since shyness and loneliness share many of the same characteristics, poor social skills and negative affect, for example, significant negative correlations of loneliness with affiliative and self-enhancing humor and a significant positive one with self-defeating humor were hypothesized. 106 community college students (34 men, 72 women) ranging in age from 17 to 52 years ( $M = 23.5$ ,  $SD = 7.7$ ) were tested. The hypotheses were supported. Interrelationships among humor, shyness, and loneliness should be examined within one study.

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Various studies, using self-report and rating scales, have yielded correlations of .40 or more between shyness and loneliness (Cheek & Busch, 1981; Jones, Freeman, & Goswick, 1981; Moore & Schultz, 1983;

- 3 Anderson & Arnoult, 1985). Research studies have shown that those high in both variables tend to have poor social skills (Zahaki & Duran, 1982; Moore & Schultz, 1983; Wittenberg & Reis, 1986; Miller, 1995; Carducci, 2000; Segrin & Flora, 2000), poor interpersonal relationships (Jones, 1981; Jones, Rose, & Russell, 1990; Carducci, 2000), and low self-esteem (Jones et al., 1981; Olmstead, Guy, O'Malley, & Rentier, 1991; Kamath & Kanekar, 1993; Schmidt & Fox, 1995).
- 5 Hampes (in press) reported shyness negatively correlated with affiliative humor and positively correlated with self-defeating humor. Affiliative humor is an interpersonal form of humor that involves use of humor (telling jokes, saying funny things, or witty banter, for
- 3 example), to put others at ease, amuse others, and to improve relationships (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003). Since those high on affiliative humor tend to score high on extraversion and intimacy (Martin et al., 2003), and lonely people, like shy people, have poor social skills and relationships, it was hypothesized that loneliness would be negatively correlated with affiliative humor.

- Self-defeating humor "involves excessively self-disparaging humor, attempts to amuse others by doing
- 30 or saying funny things at one's expense as a means of ingratiating oneself or gaining approval, allowing oneself to be the 'butt' of others' humor, and laughing along with others when being ridiculed or disparaged" (Martin et al., 2003, p. 54). Since both lonely and shy
- 35 people tend to have low self-esteem, and those high in self-defeating humor tend to score low on self-esteem (Martin et al., 2003), it was hypothesized that loneliness and self-defeating humor would be positively correlated.
- 40 Hampes (in press) did not find a significant correlation for his total group of 174 subjects between scores on shyness and self-enhancing humor, an adaptive in-trapersonal dimension of humor that "involves a generally humorous outlook on life, a tendency to be frequently amused by the incongruities of life, and to maintain a humorous perspective even in the face of stress or of adversity" (Martin et al., 2003, p. 53). However, Martin et al. reported self-enhancing humor scores were positively correlated with those on self-esteem, social intimacy, and social support, just the opposite of the relationships between loneliness and self-esteem, social intimacy, and social support. Therefore, it was hypothesized that loneliness and self-enhancing humor would be negatively correlated.
- 55 Hampes (in press) did not find a significant correlation for his total group between scores on shyness and aggressive humor (a maladaptive interpersonal type of humor, involving sarcasm, teasing, ridicule, derision, hostility, or disparagement humor) for the total group.
- 60 Therefore, it was hypothesized that there would be a nonsignificant correlation between loneliness and aggressive humor.

## Method

The subjects were 106 students (34 men, 72 women) at a community college in the midwestern United States. These students ranged in age from 17 to 52 years ( $M = 23.5$ ,  $SD = 7.7$ ). Students in four psychology classes were asked to participate, and those who volunteered were included in the sample.

The UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3) measures loneliness as a unidimensional emotional response to a

difference between desired and achieved social contact. It contains 20 items, each of which has four response options in a Likert-type format, anchored by 1 = Never and 4 = Always (e.g., "How often do you feel isolated from others?"). Coefficients alpha for the scale ranged from .89 to .94 (Russell & Cutrona, 1988). Russell, Kao, and Cutrona (1987) reported a 1-yr. test-retest correlation of .73 and estimated discriminant validity through significant negative correlations between scores on loneliness with those on social support and measures of positive mental health status.

In the Humor Styles Questionnaire, each of four scales has eight items. Each item has seven response options in a Likert-type format, anchored by 1 = Totally Disagree and 7 = Totally Agree. The Cronbach alpha for the four scales ranged from .77 to .81. The convergent validity for the Affiliative Humor Scale was indicated by significant correlations with scores on the Miller Social Intimacy Scale and Extraversion on the NEO PI-R. Discriminant validity for the Self-enhancing Humor Scale was estimated by a significant negative correlation with scores on Neuroticism of the NEO PI-R, and convergent validity was estimated with significant positive correlations with the Coping Humor Scale and the Humor Coping subscale of the Coping Orientations to Problems Experienced Scale. Convergent validity for the Aggressive Scale was supported by a significant correlation with scores on the Cook-Medley Hostility Scale. Discriminant validity for the Self-defeating Scale was based on significant negative correlations with ratings on the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale and on the Index of Self-esteem (Martin et al., 2003).

### Results and Discussion

Four Pearson product-moment correlations were computed for the scores on the UCLA Loneliness Scale-Version 3 ( $M = 41.1$ ,  $SD = 10.7$ ) and those on each of four humor scales: Affiliative ( $M = 45.5$ ,  $SD = 7.3$ ), Self-enhancing ( $M = 37.4$ ,  $SD = 8.4$ ), Aggressive ( $M = 25.8$ ,  $SD = 7.4$ ), and Self-defeating ( $M = 26.0$ ,  $SD = 8.9$ ). In each case, the hypotheses were supported, as correlations were significant for scores in Loneliness with Affiliative Humor ( $r = -.47$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $CI_{95} = -.28$  to  $-.66$ ), Self-enhancing Humor ( $r = -.39$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $CI_{95} = -.20$  to  $-.58$ ), and Self-defeating Humor ( $r = .32$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $CI_{95} = .13$  to  $.51$ ). The correlation between scores on Loneliness and Aggressive Humor was not significant ( $r = -.04$ ,  $p > .05$ ,  $CI_{95} = -.23$  to  $.15$ ).

Dill and Anderson (1999) posited that shyness precedes loneliness. Given their social anxiety, shy people tend to be unsuccessful in social situations, and so they try to avoid these. Even if they do not avoid social relationships, they tend not to have satisfying personal relationships. As a result, they may report being lonely. The idea that shyness precedes loneliness is supported by the developmental research of Kagan (1994), who stated that shyness has a strong genetic component and is manifested early in infancy, and Cheek and Busch (1981), who found shyness influenced loneliness reported by students in an introductory psychology course. If shyness does precede loneliness, it could be in part because shy individuals do not use affiliative humor and self-enhancing humor to help them be more

successful in social situations and score high in self-defeating humor, which other people might not find appealing. Further studies are needed to evaluate the causal relationships among shyness, loneliness, and styles of humor.

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