Self-Esteem Instability and Humor Styles: Does the Stability of Self-Esteem Influence How People Use Humor?

Jessica Vaughan\textsuperscript{a}, Virgil Zeigler-Hill\textsuperscript{b} & Randolph C. Arnau\textsuperscript{a}
\textsuperscript{a} University of Southern Mississippi
\textsuperscript{b} Oakland University
Accepted author version posted online: 26 Feb 2014. Published online: 20 Jun 2014.


To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2014.896773

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the “Content”) contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions
Self-Esteem Instability and Humor Styles: Does the Stability of Self-Esteem Influence How People Use Humor?

JESSICA VAUGHAN  
University of Southern Mississippi

VIRGIL ZEIGLER-HILL  
Oakland University

RANDOLPH C. ARNAU  
University of Southern Mississippi

ABSTRACT. The purpose of the present study was to examine whether self-esteem instability moderated the association between self-esteem level and the use of humor. This was accomplished by examining the associations that humor styles had with self-esteem level and self-esteem instability among 499 undergraduates. The results of the present study show that self-esteem instability moderated the association between self-esteem level and humor styles such that individuals with stable high self-esteem reported the highest levels of affiliative humor as well as the lowest levels of aggressive and self-defeating humor. These results suggest that individuals with stable and unstable forms of self-esteem employ different styles of humor.

Keywords: fragile, humor, self-esteem, unstable

RESEARCHERS INTERESTED IN HUMOR have conceptualized and measured this construct in a myriad of ways. For example, the classic psychodynamic model of humor suggested that people primarily used humor as a defense mechanism to deal with feelings of anxiety and to express unconscious desires (e.g., Freud, 1928), whereas later theorists suggested that humor served a variety of other functions, including perspective-taking (e.g., Allport, 1961; Maslow, 1954; see Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003, for a review). Measurement strategies intended to understand individual differences in humor have included reactions to various types of stimuli, the ability to tell jokes, and the ability to create humorous material (Lefcourt, 2001). It has often been suggested that humor is associated with positive outcomes, and this idea has received some empirical support (e.g., Carroll & Schmidt, 1992; Dillon & Totten, 1989; Kuiper,
But this view may be overly simplistic because it fails to acknowledge that humor may serve different functions and that different styles of humor may exist.

The most relevant aspect of humor for psychological adjustment may be the manner in which people use humor in their social interactions (Martin et al., 2003). Humor is essentially an interpersonal phenomenon that occurs primarily in social contexts and is employed to fulfill a variety of interpersonal functions, including social control, status maintenance, group cohesion, and integration (Martin, 2007). Graham (1995) found that humor decreased the social distance between individuals during initial encounters, which provides a distinct social advantage to those with greater skill at employing and recognizing humor. The framework developed by Martin and his colleagues (2003) suggests that there are two underlying dimensions that concern the interpersonal nature of the humor (i.e., injurious or benign) and the target of enhancement (i.e., self or relationships with others). These two underlying humor dimensions combine to form four distinct humor styles referred to as affiliative (benign humor that is used to enhance relationships with others), self-enhancing (benign humor that is used to enhance the self), aggressive (injurious humor that is used to enhance the self), and self-defeating (injurious humor that is used to enhance relationships with others). These four humor styles are depicted in Figure 1.

Affiliative humor involves the use of humor in social situations as a way to bolster relationships, increase cohesion, and reduce tension in group settings through strategies such as telling jokes to put others at ease. The self-enhancing humor style refers to the use of humor as a coping mechanism when someone is faced with potentially stressful events. For example, someone who utilizes the self-enhancing humor style may possess a generally humorous outlook on life that can be employed to buffer the person from being overwhelmed by negative emotions associated with aversive situations while allowing for accurate appraisals of events. Aggressive humor is presumably a maladaptive form of humor that is focused on ridiculing and teasing others in order to put them down. This form of humor often alienates other individuals and those that employ this form of humor often fail to understand the impact of their humor on those around them. Self-defeating humor involves the use of injurious humor targeted at the self in an attempt to please others and gain approval at one’s own expense through means such as a person making fun of his or her own appearance.

Previous research concerning humor styles has found that the relatively benign styles of humor (i.e., affiliative and self-enhancing) are associated with personality features such as high levels of self-esteem and low levels of neuroticism. The affiliative humor style is also positively associated with positive affect and social support, whereas the self-enhancing humor style is associated with increased levels of self-esteem and reduced symptoms of depression. Conversely, aggressive and self-defeating humor are negatively associated with these personality traits and social outcomes.
of extraversion, openness, and self-esteem, whereas the injurious styles (i.e., aggressive and self-defeating) are associated with high levels of neuroticism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism as well as low levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness (see Martin, 2007 for a review). The link between high levels of self-esteem and humor styles is particularly interesting given recent research showing that high self-esteem is associated with interpersonal styles characterized by a blend of dominance and affiliation (e.g., Zeigler-Hill, 2010). Although previous research has examined the associations between humor styles and self-esteem, the results of those studies are somewhat limited because they did not distinguish between individuals with stable and unstable forms of high self-esteem.

High levels of self-esteem have often been associated with indicators of psychological well-being (e.g., Diener, 1984), but it has also been recognized that high self-esteem is associated with negative outcomes such as aggression (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996), prejudice (Crocker, Thompson, McGraw, & Ingerman, 1987), and self-protective strategies (Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989). In order to explain how high self-esteem can be associated with seemingly contradictory outcomes, researchers have begun considering self-esteem level in conjunction with self-esteem instability (i.e., fluctuations in state self-esteem across repeated measurements; see Kernis, 2005, for a review). Unstable high self-esteem is considered to be somewhat “fragile” because frequent changes in state self-esteem suggest these feelings of self-worth are at least somewhat uncertain (see Jordan & Zeigler-Hill, 2013, for a review). The fragile feelings of self-worth possessed by those with unstable high self-esteem may be due, at least in part, to overly simplistic cognitive representations of the self (e.g., Zeigler-Hill & Showers, 2007). Unstable high self-esteem has been shown to be associated with outcomes such as interpersonal style (Zeigler-Hill, Clark, & Beckman, 2011), anger and hostility (Kernis, Grannemann, & Barclay, 1989), defensiveness (Myers & Zeigler-Hill, 2008; Zeigler-Hill, Chadha, & Osterman, 2008), and poor psychological adjustment (Zeigler-Hill & Wallace, 2012). The negative outcomes associated with unstable self-esteem may be largely due to the high levels of ego-involvement in daily activities that tend to characterize these individuals. The studies concerning individuals with unstable high self-esteem suggest that they have a strong desire to feel good about themselves but are unable to consistently maintain their relatively tenuous feelings of self-worth.

Overview and Predictions

The present study examined whether self-esteem instability moderated the associations between self-esteem level and humor styles. Previous research has found self-esteem level to be positively associated with the affiliative and self-enhancing humor styles and negatively associated with the self-defeating humor style (e.g., Kuiper, Grimshaw, Leite, & Kirsh, 2004). However, recent advances in the conceptualization of self-esteem suggest that the relationship between self-esteem and humor styles should be extended to include both stable and unstable forms of self-esteem. We expected stable high self-esteem to be associated with relatively benign uses of humor (i.e., high levels of self-enhancing and affiliative humor styles), which is consistent with the association that stable high self-esteem has with interpersonal styles reflecting affiliation (Zeigler-Hill et al., 2011). In contrast, we expected unstable high self-esteem to be associated with humor styles reflecting the injurious use of humor (i.e., aggressive and self-defeating humor styles) given the association between this form of self-esteem and hostility (Zeigler-Hill et al., 2011).
METHOD

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 930 undergraduates at a university in the southern region of the United States who were enrolled in psychology courses and participated in return for partial fulfillment of a research participation requirement. Participants completed measures of self-esteem level and humor styles as part of a larger battery of questionnaires administered online as part of a departmental mass screening. The other questionnaires in the battery captured information such as body mass index, personality features, and psychological adjustment, but were not intended to be part of the present study. The questionnaires in the battery were presented in a random order across participants, and the order of the questionnaires did not have a significant impact on the self-esteem or humor style scores reported by the participants in the present study. After completing these measures, participants were offered additional research credit in exchange for completing a measure of state self-esteem via the Internet each evening at the end of each day for seven consecutive days, so that we could assess the stability of their self-esteem. We used measures of state self-esteem collected at the end of the day because these seem to capture self-esteem instability as well as collecting state self-esteem two or more times per day (e.g., Zeigler-Hill & Showers, 2007). Of these 930 participants, 431 participants were excluded for failing to complete daily measures for three or more days. The remaining 499 participants (101 men, 398 women) had an average age of 21.35 years (SD = 3.80), and the racial/ethnic composition of the sample was 67% White, 24% Black, 2% Hispanic, and 7% Other. These final participants contributed a total of 2,753 daily reports (i.e., an average of 5.52 reports for each participant) and did not differ from those who failed to complete the daily measures in terms of sex, self-esteem level, or humor styles (ts[928] < 1.11, ns).

Measures

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) is a 10-item measure of global self-esteem (e.g., “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself”). Participants were instructed to complete the instrument according to how they typically or generally feel about themselves. Responses were made on scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). This instrument is regarded as a well-validated and reliable measure of global self-regard (see Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991 for a review of the psychometric properties of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale). For example, this instrument has been shown to be internally consistent (e.g., $\alpha = .88$; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2013) and to be negatively correlated with outcomes such as depression and anxiety (Zeigler-Hill & Wallace, 2012). The internal consistency of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale in the present study was acceptable ($\alpha = .89$).

Self-esteem instability. The method for measuring self-esteem instability was adapted from the procedure developed by Kernis and his colleagues (e.g., Kernis et al., 1989). Participants were asked to complete a modified version of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale via the Internet at the end of each day for 7 consecutive days. This instrument was modified to capture state self-esteem by instructing participants to provide the response that best reflected how they felt at the moment they completed the measure rather than how they feel about themselves in general. Responses
to these items were made on scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree). The within-subject standard deviation across the repeated assessments of state self-esteem served as the index of self-esteem instability such that higher standard deviations indicated self-esteem that was more unstable. For the present study, the internal consistency of state self-esteem was calculated for each daily measure of state self-esteem and averaged across the 7 days. The internal consistency for the daily measures of state self-esteem was acceptable ($\alpha = .85$).

### Humor styles

The Humor Styles Questionnaire (Martin et al., 2003) is a 32-item measure of the frequency with which respondents employ adaptive and maladaptive styles of humor that are either focused on the self or others. The measure yields scores for each of the following four styles of humor: affiliative humor (adaptive humor that is other-focused; e.g., “I laugh and joke a lot with my friends”; $\alpha = .86$), self-enhancing humor (adaptive humor that is self-focused; e.g., “If I am feeling depressed, I can usually cheer myself up with humor”; $\alpha = .81$), aggressive humor (maladaptive humor that is other-focused; e.g., “If I don’t like someone, I often use humor or teasing to put them down”; $\alpha = .70$), and self-defeating humor (maladaptive humor that is self-focused; e.g., “I will often get carried away in putting myself down if it makes my family or friends laugh”; $\alpha = .80$). Participants were asked to respond to these items on scales ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree). The Humor Styles Questionnaire has demonstrated adequate discriminant and convergent validity in previous studies (e.g., Martin et al., 2003; Saroglou & Scariolet, 2002; see Martin, 2007, for a review), and each humor style had adequate internal consistency in the present study.

### RESULTS

#### Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for the measures of self-esteem level, self-esteem instability, and humor styles. Self-esteem level was positively associated with the use of affiliative and self-enhancing humor, whereas it was negatively associated with the use of aggressive and self-defeating humor. In contrast, self-esteem instability was negatively

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Self-esteem level</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Self-esteem instability</td>
<td>−.16***</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Affiliative humor</td>
<td>.12**</td>
<td>−.16***</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Self-enhancing humor</td>
<td>.25***</td>
<td>−.05</td>
<td>.39***</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Aggressive humor</td>
<td>−.10*</td>
<td>−.06</td>
<td>−.16***</td>
<td>−.10*</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Self-defeating humor</td>
<td>−.21***</td>
<td>.20***</td>
<td>−.17***</td>
<td>−.16***</td>
<td>.45***</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>5.16</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>5.63</td>
<td>6.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>1.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.
associated with affiliative humor and positively correlated with self-defeating humor. The two humor styles characterized by the use of benign humor (i.e., affiliative and self-enhancing) were positively associated with each other, as were the two humor styles characterized by the use of injurious humor (i.e., self-defeating and aggressive).

Does Self-Esteem Instability Moderate the Association Between Self-Esteem Level and Humor Style?

A series of hierarchical multiple regression analyses were used to examine whether self-esteem instability moderated the associations between self-esteem level and humor styles. These analyses regressed the humor styles onto self-esteem level, self-esteem instability, and sex ($0 = \text{female}, 1 = \text{male}$). We included gender in these analyses because it has been found to moderate the association that unstable high self-esteem has with outcomes such as interpersonal style (Zeigler-Hill et al., 2011) and aggression (Webster, Kirkpatrick, Nezlek, Smith, & Paddock, 2007).

The continuous predictor variables were centered for the purpose of testing interactions (Aiken & West, 1991). For these analyses, the main effect terms for self-esteem level, self-esteem instability, and sex were entered on Step 1 with the two-way interactions of these main effect terms being entered on Step 2 and the three-way interaction entered on Step 3. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 2. These regression analyses were followed by the simple slopes tests recommended by Aiken and West (1991) to describe the interaction of continuous variables.

**Affiliative humor.** The results of the analysis concerning self-esteem instability and affiliative humor found main effects for self-esteem level ($\beta = .10, t = 2.22, p = .03, d = .20$) and self-esteem instability ($\beta = - .14, t = -3.24, p < .001, d = .29$) such that higher levels of affiliative humor were reported by those with higher levels of self-esteem and lower levels of self-esteem instability. These main effects were qualified by the interaction of self-esteem level and self-esteem instability ($\beta = - .10, t = -2.14, p = .03, d = .19$). The predicted values for this

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Affiliative humor</th>
<th>Self-enhancing humor</th>
<th>Aggressive humor</th>
<th>Self-defeating humor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step</td>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>$\Delta R^2$</td>
<td>$\beta$</td>
<td>$R^2$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.46***</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-esteem level (SEL)</td>
<td>.10*</td>
<td>.24***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-esteem instability (SEI)</td>
<td>-.14***</td>
<td>.-02</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>.19*</td>
<td>.12*</td>
<td>.47*** .01</td>
<td>.16*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SEL × SEI</td>
<td>-.10*</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SEL × Sex</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SEI × Sex</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3</td>
<td>.21*</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.47*** .00</td>
<td>.16*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SEL × SEI × Sex</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.
interaction were calculated using the regression equation and are presented in Figure 2. Simple slopes tests found that self-esteem instability was negatively associated with affiliative humor for those with high levels of self-esteem \((\beta = -0.22, t = -3.26, p < 0.001, d = 0.30)\), but it was not associated with affiliative humor for those with low self-esteem \((\beta = -0.05, t = -0.85, p = 0.39)\). These results show that individuals with stable high self-esteem reported the highest levels of affiliative humor.

**Self-enhancing humor.** The only main effect to emerge from the analysis examining the link between self-esteem instability and self-enhancing humor was self-esteem level \((\beta = 0.24, t = 5.49, p < 0.001, d = 0.50)\) such that higher levels of self-esteem were associated with higher levels of self-enhancing humor. No other main effects or interactions emerged from this analysis.

**Aggressive humor.** The results of the analysis concerning aggressive humor found a main effect for self-esteem level \((\beta = -0.10, t = -2.11, p = 0.04, d = 0.19)\) such that lower levels of self-esteem were associated with higher levels of aggressive humor. This main effect was qualified by the interaction of self-esteem level and self-esteem instability \((\beta = 0.16, t = 3.55, p < 0.001, d = 0.32)\). The predicted values for this interaction were calculated using the regression equation and are presented in Figure 3. Simple slopes tests found that self-esteem instability was positively associated with aggressive humor for those with high levels of self-esteem \((\beta = 0.21, t = 3.08, p < 0.01, d = 0.28)\), but self-esteem instability was not associated with aggressive humor for those with low self-esteem \((\beta = -0.07, t = -1.21, p = 0.23)\). Taken together, these results show that individuals with stable high self-esteem reported the lowest levels of aggressive humor.

**Self-defeating humor.** The results of the analysis concerning self-esteem instability and self-defeating humor found main effects for self-esteem level \((\beta = -0.19, t = -4.26, p < 0.001, d = 0.38)\) and self-esteem instability \((\beta = 0.17, t = 3.93, p < 0.001, d = 0.36)\). However, these
main effects were qualified by the interaction of self-esteem level and self-esteem instability ($\beta = .18$, $t = 4.02$, $p < .001$, $d = .36$). The predicted values for this interaction were calculated using the regression equation and are presented in Figure 4. Simple slopes tests found that self-esteem instability was positively associated with self-defeating humor for those with high levels of self-esteem ($\beta = .36$, $t = 5.37$, $p < .001$, $d = .49$), but it was not associated with self-defeating
humor for those with low self-esteem ($\beta = .05, t = 0.76, p = .45$). These results show that the lowest levels of self-defeating humor were reported by those with stable high self-esteem.

**DISCUSSION**

The present study examined whether self-esteem instability moderated the associations that self-esteem level had with humor styles. Our prediction that stable high self-esteem would be associated with humor styles reflecting the benign use of humor, and that unstable high self-esteem would be associated with humor styles reflecting the injurious use of humor, were supported by the results of the present study—that is, individuals with stable high self-esteem reported the highest levels of affiliative humor as well as the lowest levels of aggressive and self-defeating humor. In contrast, individuals with unstable high self-esteem reported low levels of affiliative humor as well as high levels of aggressive humor and self-defeating humor. Taken together, these results suggest that individuals with stable high self-esteem employ humor in a much more adaptive manner than those with unstable high self-esteem. The differences in the use of humor between those with stable and unstable forms of high self-esteem may be due to their interpersonal expectations. More specifically, individuals with stable high self-esteem may be more likely to expect acceptance from their social environments than other individuals (Baldwin & Sinclair, 1996), which may allow these individuals to approach group settings with more confidence and facilitate the use of more positive forms of humor. It is also possible, of course, that the adaptive use of humor may increase social acceptance and contribute to the expansion of social support which may, in turn, increase the level and stability of self-esteem. Individuals with unstable high self-esteem, on the other hand, may be more likely to expect rejection, which may lead them to employ less adaptive strategies such as lashing out at others in an aggressive manner or putting themselves down in order to get others to like them.

It is important to note that the humor styles employed by those with unstable high self-esteem were very similar to those utilized by individuals with low self-esteem. This suggests that individuals with unstable high self-esteem may resort to using the same maladaptive humor styles that characterize those with low self-esteem. In essence, individuals with unstable high self-esteem behave more like those with low self-esteem than those with stable high self-esteem in terms of how they use humor. Future research should extend the present work to explore the consequences of these maladaptive humor styles for the interpersonal relationships of those with unstable high self-esteem.

It is also interesting that self-esteem instability failed to moderate the association that self-esteem level had with self-enhancing humor. This suggests that there is no significant difference in the likelihood of those with stable and unstable forms of high self-esteem using self-enhancing humor. It is possible that those with stable and unstable forms of high self-esteem find self-enhancing humor beneficial. Future research may want to consider whether individuals with stable and unstable forms of high self-esteem use self-enhancing humor in different situations (e.g., when they feel threatened) and experience different consequences following their use of this particular style of humor (e.g., greater confidence).

It is important to gain a better understanding of the connection between self-esteem and humor for a number of reasons. One reason is that it has the potential to enrich our understanding of both constructs. This is especially true given that we employed relatively nuanced conceptualizations
of both self-esteem (by including self-esteem instability as well as self-esteem level) and humor (by including a measure of distinct humor styles). Another reason this work is important is that previous research has suggested that both high self-esteem (Zeigler-Hill & Besser, in press; Zeigler-Hill, Besser, Myers, Southard, & Malkin, 2013; Zeigler-Hill & Myers, 2009, 2011) and humor styles (Zeigler-Hill, Besser, & Jett, 2013) serve as interpersonal signals. The idea that these constructs may serve as interpersonal signals has its basis in Darwin’s (1871) model of sexual selection. That is, it is possible that self-esteem and humor may have evolved as mating displays that signal the possession of certain qualities to the social environment. For example, high self-esteem is believed to serve as a signal for qualities such as confidence and social dominance, whereas humor serves as a signal for intelligence and creativity. According to this perspective, self-esteem and humor—like many other psychological traits—may have evolved as a result of intersexual selection and may serve as indicators of underlying mutational load. Phenotypic variation in self-esteem or the tendency to use humor in certain ways may provide cues about the qualities possessed by individuals which may, in turn, influence mate choice such that those with high levels of self-esteem or a greater capacity for certain types of humor may be viewed as more romantically desirable than others who lack these qualities. The results of the present study suggest there is an intimate connection between these potential interpersonal signals.

Although the present study has a number of strengths, it is also important to acknowledge some of its potential limitations. First, the correlational nature of the study prevents us from understanding causal relationship between self-esteem and humor style. Our underlying process model for the present study was that the self-esteem of individuals would lead them to adopt particular humor styles, but this cannot be established using the present data. For example, it is unclear whether the frequent use of affiliative humor reported by individuals with stable high self-esteem was due to their feelings of self-worth or if the direction of causation was reversed such that their affiliative humor style may have led to the development of stable high self-esteem. That is, it is possible that humor style may serve as a means for regulating self-esteem, which should certainly be explored in future research (e.g., individuals may engage in aggressive humor in order to feel better about themselves). It is also possible that a more complex reciprocal relationship may exist between these constructs or that a third variable—such that a basic dimension of personality such as extraversion—may have influenced the development of both stable high self-esteem and humor style. Further research is clearly needed to gain a better understanding of the causal link between unstable high self-esteem and the use of humor. Second, the present studies relied exclusively on self-report measures, which leaves open the possibility that the observed effects may reflect self-perceptions concerning the use of humor rather than how they actually use humor in their daily lives. Future research may want to examine how individuals with different forms of self-esteem employ humor in controlled situations without relying solely on self-reports. Third, the present relied on undergraduate students, which may limit the generalizability of the present findings. It is possible that the associations between self-esteem and humor styles may vary across development periods. As a result of this uncertainty, it may be beneficial for future researchers to extend the present findings by including individuals from a broader array of developmental periods. Fourth, the present study had far more female participants than male participants. Sex was included in the analyses, but it failed to emerge as a moderator of these effects, even though there were an adequate number of men for detecting moderation. As a result, it does not appear that sex plays an important role in the association between self-esteem and humor style, but future studies should attempt to have a more evenly balanced number of male and female participants.
Conclusion

The findings of the present study suggest that self-esteem instability moderates the associations that self-esteem level has with humor styles. That is, different forms of self-esteem are associated with particular ways of using humor. For example, individuals with stable high self-esteem reported the highest levels of affiliative humor as well as the lowest levels of aggressive humor and self-defeating humor. These results extend our understanding of the connection that self-esteem has with humor style and provide additional support for the need to consider self-esteem instability when exploring the connections that self-esteem level has with interpersonal behaviors such as the use of humor.

NOTE

1. In order to assess self-esteem instability, it is essential that participants complete multiple measures of state self-esteem, which means that some minimum number of state self-esteem measures must be established in order for participants to be included in the analyses. The decision to only include participants in the final analyses who contributed data for three or more days follows the convention established in previous research (e.g., Zeigler-Hill et al., 2010; Zeigler-Hill & Showers, 2007).

AUTHOR NOTES

Jessica Vaughan is affiliated with the Department of Psychology, University of Southern Mississippi. Virgil Zeigler-Hill is affiliated with the Department of Psychology, Oakland University. Randolph C. Arnau is affiliated with the Department of Psychology, University of Southern Mississippi.

REFERENCES


Received July 24, 2013
Accepted February 17, 2014