Insights into Negative Humor in Organizations: Development of the Negative Humor Questionnaire

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Negative humor has long been used in organizations, resulting in both positive and negative outcomes. This study describes the development of the multi-item Negative Humor Questionnaire, a measure based on confirmatory factor analysis. This 13-item scale was developed to assess individual level negative humor use. Domination and denigration are two dimensions of negative humor. The findings reveal that individuals may use negative humor intentionally in an attempt to gain superiority over other individuals and denigrate them.

Humor is important in organizational behavior and needs further research (Avolio, Howell & Sosik, 1999; Duncan, Smelzer, & Leap, 1990; Romero & Arendt, 2011). It has been studied for its constructive effects on promoting organizational change (Fox & Amichai-Hamburger, 2001), improving leadership (Decker & Rotondo, 2001), facilitating conflict management (Morris et al., 1998), enhancing group effectiveness (Romero & Pescosolido, 2008), and maintaining workplace culture (Holmes & Marra, 2002). Previous research has focused on utilizing positive humor to achieve favorable outcomes (e.g., Arendt, 2009; Fraley & Aron, 2004, Romero, 2005). For example, Romero and Cruthirds (2006, p. 59) proposed a model of workplace humor defined as "amusing communications that produce positive emotions and cognitions in the individual, group, or organization."

However, there is also a potentially negative side to humor. Common examples are hazing (Taylor, 2001), ethnic jokes (Juni & Katz, 2001; Davies, 1982), disability-oriented jokes (Albrecht, 1999), and horseplay or practical jokes (Dreyfack, 1994). What is common with all of these types of negative humor is that they may distract personnel from work, cause emotional stress, and sometimes result in physical conflict. Thus, negative humor in an organizational environment can be understood through various humor messages initiated by some employees that cause emotional harm to other employees in the organization. The implications of these types of behaviors can be severe. When negative humor is interpreted as harassment, it can lead to lawsuits, legal action by government enforcement agencies, reduction in productivity, and induce employee turnover (Duncan et al., 1990; Mueller, DeCoster, & Estes, 2002). For example, the United States Merit Services Protection Board (1994) identified sexual teasing and joking as one of six types of behavior that can be construed as sexual harassment. In that report, the agency estimated that sexual harassment cost the government around $327.1 million per year in job turnover, sick leave, and reduced individual and workgroup productivity.

However, negative humor does have utility (Gruner, 1997; Boxer & Cortes-Conde, 1997). Examples include teasing, mild ridicule, practical jokes, funny nicknames, embarrassing stories, etc. Negative humor can contribute to team building and bonding as long as common sense is used (Terrion & Ashforth, 2002). Managers regularly motivate workers with a variety of traditional approaches (i.e., rewards, praise, etc.), but those might not be as effective for certain situations. A prime example is basic military training (boot camp) in the United States, where drill sergeants use negative humor on new recruits. Drill sergeants use such humor to demonstrate their dominance over recruits and secure compliance to extraordinarily difficult training requirements, where common forms of motivation would be ineffective. Boot camp requires recruits to undergo a massive transformation from civilian to solider in a short period of time. Teasing and ridicule are highly effective in this and similar situations, where immediate compliance to orders from superiors is essential to success. It is a form of negative reinforcement that motivates followers to comply and creates a sense of belonging for those who do.

This dynamic also works, at varying levels of intensity, with police and firefighters, stock and commodity traders, and other groups that have strong bonds and/or are involved in intense situations. Since negative humor can vary in intensity, it can be both funny and deliver a clear message at the same time. Therefore, negative humor can lead to positive effects. This can be seen in fraternities, sports teams, groups of male friends, etc. Overall, negative humor is effective in tough environments and when rigorous standards are expected (i.e., coaching). It also works well in cohesive groups composed of mature adults who communicate honestly and use negative humor for fun, member initiation, and to point out behaviors that need correction. However, negative humor might not work in politically correct cultures where free speech is severely restricted and people are easily offended. In fact, even positive humor might not be accepted in such an environment.

The purposes of this paper are to uncover the meaning of negative humor through an extensive literature review and qualitative research, and to develop a scale to

measure negative humor in organizations. To achieve these goals, this paper begins with an examination of the theoretical basis of negative humor followed by qualitative research that identifies behavioral antecedents of negative humor. Next, the scale is developed using established techniques from the literature.

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundation of Negative Humor

There are three theories of humor that play integral roles in the use of negative humor: incongruity and resolution (Duncan, 1985), superiority (de Koning & Weiss, 2002), and disposition (Wicker, Barron, & Willis, 1980; Zillman, 2002) theories. Humor has at least three players: the initiator (one who tells the joke), focus (person or thing used as the butt of the joke), and target(s) (those to whom the joke is presented) (Lundberg, 1969). These three roles do not necessarily have to be three distinct people, since one person can assume two roles. For example, individual 'A' may tell a joke about individual 'B' directly to 'B,' thereby making 'B' the focus and target. Likewise, 'A' may tell a joke about himself or herself, making 'A' the initiator and focus.

Incongruity Theory

Incongruity theory suggests that humor comes from the unexpected delivery of disjointed information or surprising pairings of ideas (Duncan, 1985). Resolution theory takes the process one-step further by proposing that joke incongruence is not where humor is created, it is created by resolving incongruity (Schultz, 1976). For example, there is a W. C. Fields joke in which someone asks, "Mr. Fields, do you believe in clubs for young people?" Fields responds, "Only when kindness fails." Here humor is enjoyed when one realizes the incongruity between the two meanings of *club* used in the question and answer. With negative humor, incongruity is constructed by using someone, or something, as the focus of humor where there is an intent to degrade the focus.

Superiority Theory

Superiority theory builds on incongruity theory by employing the same method of eliciting laughter but with one differentiating feature. Disparaging humor is initiated and enjoyed by those who are dominant or wish to be. Bergen (1998) held that disparagement humor is frequently used to express superiority. Disparagement humor is used to victimize, belittle, and cause others some type of misfortune, which is often construed as an act of aggression (Zillman, 1983). In doing so, people who use this humor want to elevate themselves above others and feel superior (Nevo, 1985). The result is their feeling superior, usually at another person's expense, and, in some cases, they do achieve (or perceive to achieve) a higher rank or status (de Koning & Weiss, 2002).

Methodology

Focus Group Research

Focus group research is used to increase the likelihood of producing valid constructs (Churchill, 1979). The qualitative research presented in this paper was conducted by using two focus groups in different locations, each consisting of eight individuals who had full-time corporate positions. A variety of participants in terms of gender, experience, industry, and management were recruited on a voluntary basis. Across the two focus groups, there were 50% female participants and 50% male participants. Also included were 25% senior-level managers, 25% mid-level managers, and 50% entry-level employees. The average work experience was 6.5 years.

The participants were asked numerous questions about experiences with negative humor and possible negative consequences. The probing started with the contextual questions, such as where and when the participants had organizational experiences in negative humor. Next, the participants were prompted to reflect how the negative humor messages were delivered and for what purpose. Lastly, the participants were asked about the consequences of negative humor. Testimonials were elicited regarding panel members' experiences as the target, focus, and initiator in negative humor. In this process, the participants were encouraged to elaborate or comment on others' inputs. Each focus group lasted about two hours. Results were transcribed, and after structural conceptualization (Trochim & Linton, 1986; Shaver et al., 1987), two dimensions of negative humor were discovered: domination and denigration.

Domination. Respondents described negative humor as a tool to "put-down" others for either pleasure or personal gain. They either instigated or joined groups using negative humor to gain an advantage over a person or group. Disparaging humor was used against other people who could be intimidated, resulting in fear or a sense of inferiority. When in their presence, people did not feel in control as compared to when with a group of peers.

A second focus group commented on the first year in their current job. Several peers would wait until a group was together to tell a negative joke about another worker embarrassing him and making him want to avoid group gatherings. This person felt that the initiator(s) did so because of jealousy for a job well done. The initiator was trying to influence other targets to feel some negativity toward the focus in an effort to have the targets look up to him as a leader. The respondents commented how, when in this same social group, the person trying to emerge as the leader would target a group member with negative humor thereby elevating his status within the group. The actions by the initiator were rewarded by the negative reaction of the focus and group status heightened when the focus was among his peers (Follman et al., 2011). These actions and results illustrated the concept of dominating others through the use of negative humor within and outside of groups.

Denigration. A second theme emerged as the focus groups related a different side to their observance of negative humor. Panel members expressed discomfort when "socially trapped" in a situation where certain types of negative humor were used that they judged to be offensive. In these cases, the respondents were not the focus of the humor but intended targets or those meant to be impressed by the initiator. They were

unanimous in their behavior during the negative humor. Each admitted to remaining quiet during the joke pretending to enjoy it, all the while knowing that they should either say something or leave but chose to do neither. When in this situation, they felt belittled, which resulted in anger, frustration, and self-loathing. The result for most was that they felt "small" or "inadequate" in the presence of the negative humor initiator. In doing so, they felt very guilty for not having reacted differently and in effect felt denigrated because of their guilt over their inaction.

These findings are consistent with superiority theory (de Koenig & Weiss, 2002) in that individuals often use disparaging jokes in an attempt to gain superiority. The aggression and open hostility exhibited by initiators were also congruent with Bergen (1998) who mentioned that negative humor was used to express hostility toward another person in an effort to gain superiority.

Generation of Questionnaire Items

Focus group results were used to generate an initial list of items to measure the behavioral aspects of negative humor. A total of 43 Likert-type questions were formed. Existing research constructs used were also consulted in order to assess the aggressive manner of humor (Bergen, 1998; Martin et al., 2003). The purpose of evaluating existing research constructs was to differentiate the measurement items of negative humor from the aggressive humor measures. Items were reviewed by several independent management researchers and modified based on their suggestions. All items used a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = totally disagree, 7 = totally agree). In a pre-test, data were collected from a sample of 100 MBA students who had full-time jobs. Respondents had an average of 5 years in the workforce and a mean age of 28. Data testing began with principal component analysis using varimax rotation. Appraisal of each individual item was performed by considering both loading scores as well as the item's relevance to theory. Following suggestions by Nunnally (1978), 13 items loaded at .5 or above respectively on two factors with high internal reliability values (.91 and .73 respectively).

Statistical Results

Replication analysis was conducted using a second sample. The MBA students with full-time jobs utilized in the pre-test were chosen to interview up to five of their coworkers who held positions at the same or higher organizational level as themselves. Interviewers were instructed to have respondents complete the questionnaire and add a daytime phone number for verification purposes. A total of 214 respondents returned the questionnaire in a one-month period. These respondents were contacted by phone and asked if they had answered a survey within the previous week for a university student. One hundred percent of the respondents selected answered that they had.

The demographics were very close to the initial sample with an average of 5 years work experience and a mean age of 27. Using maximum likelihood extraction method and an oblimin with Kaiser normalization rotation, replication factor analysis produced the same two factors with adequate loadings and reliabilities. Results are reported in Table 1.

Table 1: *Factor Loadings for Exploratory Factor Analysis of Negative Humor*

Variable Name	Items	Factor Loadings	
		Domination	Denigration
stopjoke	If a coworker is telling an offensive joke, some people may feel mad.		0.75
walkaway	If someone is telling a put-down joke, other will walk away.		0.74
okfriend	It is not o.k. for my good friend who is from another ethnic group to tell jokes about my ethnic group.		0.60
angry	It makes people angry when hearing a put-down joke about them.		0.80
badmood	If it were me, I would get in a bad mood when people around me tell offensive jokes.		0.86
complaint	When I tell a put-down joke at work, I am aware of complaints.		0.60
tease	If someone makes a mistake, I will often tease them about it.	0.66	
othergroup	I enjoy telling jokes about people from other ethnic groups.	0.72	
advantage	Telling a put-down joke about someone to their face could help me gain advantage over them.	0.66	
happiness	I feel a sense of happiness when I tell put-down jokes about people I do not like.	0.63	
feelbetter	When I have a bad day, telling a put-down joke about someone makes me feel better.	0.70	
enjoyment	I feel a sense of enjoyment when I tell put-down jokes about other people.	0.93	
geteven	When I tell a put-down joke about my boss, I feel like I'm getting even.	0.91	
	Cronbach's Alpha	0.81	0.73

Divergent Validity

To test for divergent validity, the questionnaire incorporated all 13 items from the initial exploratory analysis along with the Aggressive Humor Scale (Martin et al, 2003). Correlations were calculated and comparisons made between the Aggressive Humor Scale and the negative humor factors (see Table 2). Low and/or non-significant correlations were realized between these components (.07 to .24), indicating divergent validity.

Table 2: *Correlations for Divergent Validity*

		Aggressive Humor	Denigration	Domination
Aggressive Humor	Pearson Correlation	1.00		
	Sig. (2-tailed)			
	N	214		
Denigration	Pearson Correlation	0.12	1.00	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.07		
	N	214	214	
Domination	Pearson Correlation	0.07	0.24	1.00
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.31	0.02	
	N	214	214	214

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Following Joreskog and Sorbom's (1993) instructions, multiple procedures were adopted to test the measurement model using confirmatory factor analysis. Each factor was measured separately by evaluating fit of appropriate indicators to negative humor, as well as fit of negative humor dimensions.

Denigration. There were 6 items, each having significant path coefficients, used as indicators of *denigration.* As seen in Table 3, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), goodness-of-fit index (GFI), adjusted goodness-of-fit (AGFI), comparative fit index (CFI), and Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) all indicated a good level of fit when compared to Hu and Bentler's (1999) and Rigdon's (1996) multiple criteria. All factor loadings were above (.60 to .86) the minimum value of .5 (Nunnally, 1978).

Domination. Seven items were significantly related to domination. Once again, indices of fit, as seen in Table 3, point toward a good fit. The factor loadings were all above the lower limit of .5 (Nunnally, 1978), having standardized values ranging from .66 to .93.

Table 3: *Fit Indices*

Construct	X^2	d.f.	*p*-level	RMSEA	GFI	AGFI	CFI	TLI	CR[a]	VE[b]
Denigration	9.94	7	0.19	0.04	0.99	0.95	0.99	0.99	0.86	0.49
Domination	22.03	12	0.04	0.06	0.97	0.93	0.99	0.98	0.87	0.54
Composite	134.63	60	0.00	0.08	0.91	0.87	0.95	0.93		
a	Construct Reliability									
b	Variance Extracted									

The full measurement model was then estimated. Second order confirmatory factor analysis was calculated. When examining the relationship of each dimension to the overall negative humor, denigration and domination had standardized path coefficients of .60 and .57, respectively (see Table 4).

Discriminant validity was tested between the two dimensions. Two factor analyses yielded a multi-item scale of negative humor. Each of the two factors displayed good reliability and good face validity. Items are representative of dominating attitudes as well as the desire to create a negative humor situation. Once again relying on Joreskog and Sorbom (1993), discriminant validity with the full model was assessed for the two first-order factors. A two-construct measurement model was calculated in which the correlation between denigration and domination was fixed at one as suggested by Bagozzi (1981) and Anderson and Gerbing (1988). This model produced a poor fit: χ^2 (64) = 254.518, p = .000, RMSEA = .118, GFI= .868, AGFI = .813, CFI = .862, and TLI = .832. When correlation between the constructs was unconstrained, model fit was significantly improved: $\chi^2(61)$ = 153.53, p = .000, RMSEA = .084, GFI = .905, AGFI = .859, CFI = .933, and TLI = .914. Therefore, it can be inferred from this comparison that there is evidence of discriminant validity.

Table 4: *Standardized Regression Weights*

Path			Estimate
Denigration	→	Neghumor	0.601
Domination	→	Neghumor	0.571
stopjoke	→	Denigration	0.876
walkaway	→	Denigration	0.735
okfriend	→	Denigration	0.476
angry	→	Denigration	0.746
badmood	→	Denigration	0.619
complaint	→	Denigration	0.698
tease	→	Domination	0.662
othergroup	→	Domination	0.696
advantage	→	Domination	0.724
happiness	→	Domination	0.739
feelbetter	→	Domination	0.734
enjoyment	→	Domination	0.686
geteven	→	Domination	0.697

All the standardized coefficients are significant at .01 level.

Discussion of Results

Using qualitative and quantitative analyses, the contention that negative humor has multiple dimensions was supported. Findings suggested that negative humor has at least two major dimensions: domination and denigration. The discovery of domination is significant for humor research. It was shown to be a divisive tool that could be employed to segregate, as well as to assert dominance. Denigration was found to be used to establish superiority in organizations. Previous research addressed the concept of negative humor as a debilitating action within organizations. Although negative humor can create anger and frustration for the receiving side, it can also act as a tool in gaining and maintaining power groups (Zillman & Stocking, 1976). It reveals the constructive side of negative humor. Previous research supported this position by suggesting that individuals use humor to gain advantage over opponents, exert pressure, and to influence others (Decker & Rotondo, 2001; Quinn, 2000; Collinson, 2002).

Managerial Implications

This study illustrated negative humor's constructive uses, as well as its harmful outcomes. The Negative Humor Questionnaire measured individuals' propensity to use negative humor as a means to gain power and privilege in organizations. It can be administered to job applicants as a screening tool in the hiring process. It can guide human resource managers to determine how comfortable prospective employees are in

the presence of negative humor and their inclination to use negative humor to control others. Respondents who score very high on the scale may end up creating problems for the company. Frequent use of teasing, ridicule and other types of negative humor could result in a hostile work environment, which can constitute grounds for lawsuits.

Conversely, individuals who score very low may have a tendency to be too easily offended by even harmless negative humor. Although the hiring decision may not hinge on this score, it should serve as a possible forecast of the ability to withstand moderate amounts of teasing or other forms of common adult humor. These employees could also present potential litigation problems. Because their threshold for negative humor is extremely low, even small amounts of teasing may result in negative feelings and low satisfaction with work. The Negative Humor Questionnaire could aid in selecting team members in order to balance membership with certain tolerance and usage levels of negative humor.

Limitations and Further Research Recommendations

One methodological limitation of this research is that samples were taken from one area in the U.S. However, cultural differences play a role in shaping humor perceptions (Romero et al., 2007). Further research using different areas of the country as well as international studies will be necessary to better understand negative humor. As Kalliny, Cruthirds, and Minor (2006) pointed out, international differences in humor styles do exist in organizations. Validation from the study of other countries is important for explaining this dynamic in multi-national organizations. Testing the Negative Humor Questionnaire in situations as described above will further validate the scale's predictive validity. In addition, continued research into the antecedents and consequences of using negative humor will advance humor research, thereby developing this very important area in organizational behavior.

In both the qualitative study and quantitative analysis, the participants' differences in the perception of negative humor based on important demographic variables, such as gender, age, education, ethnic groups, religion, etc. were not investigated. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, the sample contained MBA students with different types of jobs and diverse backgrounds. This group of participants may not experience the same type of negative humor at work because of the different corporate culture shaped by gender, age, and ethnic composition. For instance, age and educational level have been shown to influence humor styles (Carretero-Dios, Perez, & Buela-Casal, 2010; Vitulli & Barbin, 1991). Thus, the use of negative humor may more likely be used by younger and less educated individuals in the workplace because of the learned manners accumulated through educational and social experience. In addition, Kalliny et al. (2006) found that men tend to use more negative humor than women regardless of cultural background. Thus, differences in the use of negative humor can be expected based on many demographic variables. These demographic moderators should be articulated in future studies. In studying negative humor, future research should also consider the moderating influences of organizational variables, such as level of competition (high or low), job autonomy (high or low), type of organization (private or governmental), and brand equity. These variables may also significantly influence the degree and extent of negative humor.

Conclusion

This paper expanded on a concept that has been discussed in the literature, but never identified and researched empirically. As such, this study added significant value to the literature and to practitioners. It also provided a basis for further study of negative humor. The adoption of membership rules, as well as the relationship that forms between initiator, focus, and targets of negative humor, are future areas that should be addressed through future empirical research.

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