

The Moderating Role of Employees' Humor Styles on the Relationship between Job Stress and Emotional Exhaustion

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Received: February 20, 2017

Accepted: March 14, 2017

Online Published: March 23, 2017

doi:10.5539/ibr.v10n4p131

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ibr.v10n4p131>

Abstract

In today's work conditions, job stress and emotional exhaustion are serious threats for the health of employees. Previous research suggests a relationship between job stress and emotional exhaustion. The way individuals use humor has been associated with different coping strategies. The aim of this study is to investigate the moderating role of employees' humor styles on the relationship between job stress and emotional exhaustion. 116 participants completed self-reported measures assessing their job stress, emotional exhaustion and humor styles. For data analyses a series of hierarchical moderated regression analyses were conducted. The findings show that self-enhancing and self-defeating humor styles have moderating effects on the relationship between job stress and emotional exhaustion. As the level of self-enhancing humor increases, the effect of job stress on emotional exhaustion is attenuated, on the other hand, as the level of self-defeating humor increases, the effect of job stress on emotional exhaustion is intensified. Findings regarding the effects of employees' humor styles are discussed.

Keywords: humor styles, job stress, emotional exhaustion

1. Introduction

Humor is a double-edged sword, which can help in difficult situations to smooth things, but also can hurt by offending people in another situation. In workplace, if it's relevant to motivation or facilitation, it can be used by employees in order to enrich the environment. Early humor theories can be categorized under three topics: Incongruity, superiority and relief theories. Incongruity theories suggest that people laugh at contradictory things, which normally do not come together. (Kant, 1951). Superiority theories suggest that people laugh at things, situations or people, over which they feel superior (Hobbes, 1968). Relief theories, on the other hand, suggest that people laugh at topics affecting areas in which they have bottled up feelings, like sex or aggression (Freud, 1960). More recent studies focus on people's humorous styles rather than at what they laugh. Martin and friends (2003) distinguished between four different humor styles, namely, self-enhancing, affiliative, self-defeating and aggressive humor styles, which have different effects on what people experience.

The interest people show in humor has been increasing in recent years. The most important reason for this is the positive effects of humor on physical and mental health. People who have a good sense of humor are better in coping with different problems, because they have a positive approach to difficulties (Kuiper et al., 1995). They use reframing and problem solving methods more frequently, which makes them experience less stress in the face of daily challenges (Abel, 2002). Humor can help to diminish the negative effects of stress. In this context, it is important to investigate the effects of humor at work, because the adverse effects of stress are common in workplace. High pressure and demands at work causes emotional exhaustion, which is the beginning of the exhaustion process.

This study seeks to contribute the emerging literature on the effects of humor in workplace. For this purpose, the moderating role of employees' humor styles on the relationship between job stress and emotional exhaustion is examined.

1.1 Humor Styles

According to Martin and friends (2003) humor styles are gathered around two axis. The first axis comprises the reason of using humor and the second axis comprises the healthiness of peoples' using styles. The reason why people use humor can either be the effort to provide own or others' contribution and the using style of humor can either be in a benign or injurious form. About these two axis, Martin and friends (2003) defined four humor

styles: Affiliative humor, self-enhancing humor, aggressive humor and self-defeating humor (See Figure 1). Affiliative humor is often used to facilitate relationships and reduce interpersonal tensions. People can say funny things or tell jokes in order to solve problems more easily. Self-enhancing humor is often used to be able to see the positive side of things. One can develop a different perspective in order to see the acceptable side of something that happened. Aggressive humor on the other hand, is often used to humiliate others. One can tell sexist or racist jokes. Self-defeating humor is often used to defeat oneself for being able to gain others' approval. One can say bad things about self and accepts being a victim, because of the lack of self-respect. In this context, the use of humor can either be in a positive or negative way. Benign or injurious humor styles can have different consequences (Vrabel et al., 2017). Affiliative and self-enhancing humor styles are positively correlated with life satisfaction and negatively correlated with depressive symptoms (Dyck and Holtzman, 2013). Aggressive and self-defeating humor on the other hand, are negatively correlated with happiness (Ford et al., 2014) and positively correlated with depressive symptoms (Tucker et al., 2013).

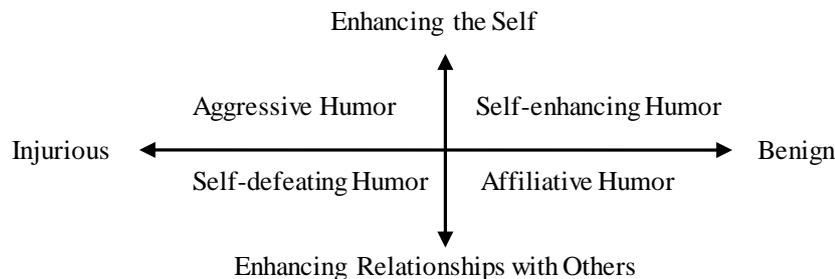


Figure 1. Humor Styles (Martin et al., 2003)

1.2 Job Stress and Emotional Exhaustion

Stress is the most explored phenomenon in organizational psychology because of its complicated nature which relates to many other significant facts in organization. Job stress is a state of strain which creates tension by the worker (Clegg, 2001). This tension causes unfavorable results in organizations, like an increase in absenteeism and employee turnover (Williams & Cooper, 1998). Job stress has a negative effect on employees' health. In developed and developing countries, it is one of the most important health-risk factors (Rehman et al., 2012). Negative experiences in workplace deplete emotional resources of employees, which leads them to emotional exhaustion (Yi et al., 2016). High levels of job stress will bring in turn high levels of emotional exhaustion, which can be regarded as an abrasion. Emotional exhaustion is one of the three sub-dimensions of burnout (Maslach and Jackson, 1981). The other two sub-dimensions, namely depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment, follow emotional exhaustion, which is the most determining dimension of burnout (Bakker and Schaufeli, 2000). It causes a cognitive and emotional alienation of work and accepted in general as a result of excessive work load (Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001). Emotional exhaustion has also serious consequences for the organizations. It relates negatively to the total performance of employees (Parker & Kulik, 1995); and positively to turnover and absenteeism (Cropanzano et al., 2003)

Workplace is generally a chaotic environment with many complicated issues which have to be solved quickly. The employees usually have to struggle with these circumstances by using their own resources. Humor can be one of these resources which can be used to cope with stress and its consequences. The model of the study is hypothesized in order to examine the moderating role of employees' humor styles on the relationship between job stress and emotional exhaustion (Figure 2).

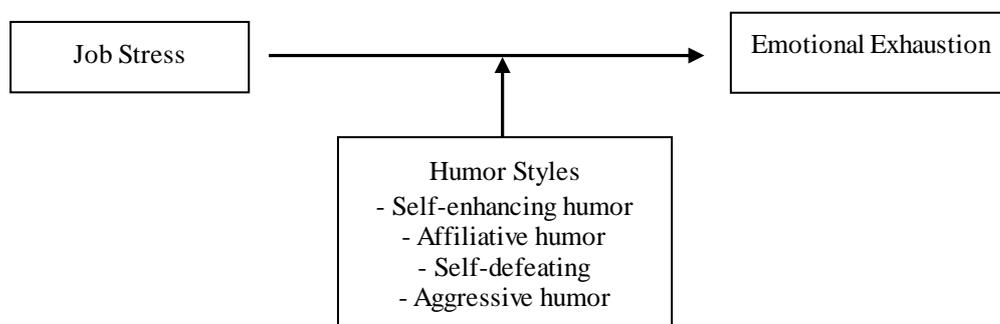


Figure 2. Hypothesized Model for the Study

The following hypotheses are developed:

H1: Self-enhancing humor has a moderating effect on the relationship between job stress and emotional exhaustion.

H2: Affiliative humor has a moderating effect on the relationship between job stress and emotional exhaustion.

H3: Self-defeating humor has a moderating effect on the relationship between job stress and emotional exhaustion.

H4: Aggressive humor has a moderating effect on the relationship between job stress and emotional exhaustion.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The sample consisted of 116 participants (61 males, 55 females). Data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire, based on a convenience sample method. 51% of the participants were graduated from a University. The mean age was 35.68 (SD=6.80) and the mean of job tenure was 10.89 (SD=6.41). %41.38 of the participants were working in education sector. %31.03 were working in finance, %20.69 were working in marketing sector and %6.90 were working in the healthcare industry.

2.2 Measures

Humor Style Questionnaire (Martin et al. 2003) was used to measure participants' humor styles. It consists of 32 items. It is a 6 point Likert scale (1= totally disagree, 6= totally agree) and measures the four humor styles: Affiliative humor ($\alpha = .83$), self-enhancing humor ($\alpha = .78$), aggressive humor ($\alpha = .73$) and self-defeating humor ($\alpha = .81$). There are 8 items for each style.

In order to measure participants' job stress, Occupational Stress Scale was used, which was developed by House and Rizzo (1972) and consists of seven items that measure employees' perceptions of pressure and frustrations stemming from their work. Cronbach's alpha values of the scale ranges between .71 and .89 (Netemeyer et al., 1990; Cropanzo et al., 1997; Grandney & Cropanzano, 1998). It is a 5 point Likert scale (1= totally disagree, 5= totally agree).

In order to measure participants' emotional exhaustion, the first subscale of Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1981) was used. It is a 5 point Likert scale (1= totally disagree, 5= totally agree) and consists of 9 items ($\alpha = .90$).

3. Results

According to the correlation analysis results, there is a positive relationship between job stress and emotional exhaustion ($r=.43$, $p<.01$). There is a negative relationship between emotional exhaustion and self-enhancing humor ($r= -.36$, $p<.01$) and affiliative humor ($r= -.26$, $p<.01$). There is a positive relationship between emotional exhaustion and self-defeating humor ($r=.37$, $p<.01$). Table 1 provides means, standard deviations and correlations between variables.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations between Variables

	Mean	SS	2	3	4	5	6
1.Job Stress	4.02	.81	.43**	.15	-.09	-.03	-.16
2.Emotional Exhaustion	3.31	.83		-.36**	-.26**	.37**	.07
3.Self-enhancing Humor	3.58	.72			.25**	-.24*	-.09
4.Affiliative Humor	3.63	.71				-.29**	.08
5.Self-defeating Humor	3.00	.59					.33**
6.Aggressive Humor	2.68	.78					

* $p<.05$ ** $p<.01$

According to the results of hierarchical regression analysis, self-enhancing humor has a moderating effect ($\beta = -.251$, $p<.01$) on the relationship between job stress and emotional exhaustion. (See Table 2). In model 3 there is a significant increase in the variance explained for emotional exhaustion ($\Delta R^2 = .415$, $p<.01$). The interaction of job stress and self-enhancing humor on emotional exhaustion can be seen at Figure 3. As the level of self-enhancing humor increases, the effect of job stress on emotional exhaustion is attenuated.

Table 2. Regression Analysis for the Moderator Role of Self-enhancing Humor between Job Stress and Emotional Exhaustion

Model	R ²	Δ R ²	F		β	t
1	.189	.181	26.485	JS	.434	5.146**
2	.375	.364	33.890	JS	.500	6.651**
				SEH	-.437	-5.805**
3	.430	.415	28.210	JS	.458	6.246**
				SEH	-.354	-4.635**
				JS*SEH	-.251	-3.303**

**p<.01

JS: Job Stress; SEH: Self-enhancing Humor

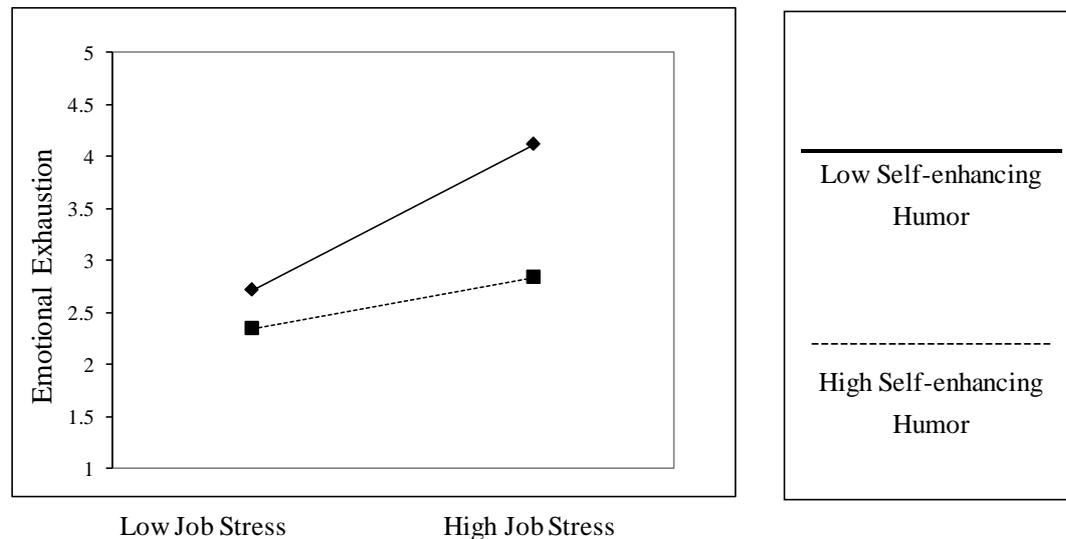


Figure 3. Interaction of Job Stress and Self-Enhancing Humor on Emotional Exhaustion

According to the results of hierarchical regression analysis, affiliative humor doesn't have a moderating effect on the relationship between job stress and emotional exhaustion. (See Table 3).

Table 3. Regression Analysis for the Moderator Role of Affiliative Humor between Job Stress and Emotional Exhaustion

Model	R ²	Δ R ²	F		β	t
1	.189	.181	26.485	JS	.434	5.146**
2	.236	.223	17.465	JS	.414	5.011**
				AFH	-.219	-2.653**
3	.243	.222	11.960	JS	.421	5.080**
				AFH	-.219	-2.647**
				JS*AFH	-.081	-.981

**p<.01

JS: Job Stress; AFH: Affiliative Humor

According to the results of hierarchical regression analysis, self-defeating humor has a moderating effect ($\beta = .226$, $p < .01$) on the relationship between job stress and emotional exhaustion. (See Table 4). In model 3 there is a significant increase in the variance explained for emotional exhaustion ($\Delta R^2 = .363$, $p < .01$). The interaction of job stress and self-defeating humor on emotional exhaustion can be seen at Figure 4. As the level of self-defeating humor increases, the effect of job stress on emotional exhaustion is intensified.

Table 4. Regression Analysis for the Moderator Role of Self-defeating Humor between Job Stress and Emotional Exhaustion

Model	R ²	Δ R ²	F		β	t
1	.189	.181	26.485	JS	.434	5.146**
2	.333	.321	28.212	JS	.445	5.785**
				SDH	.380	4.948**
3	.379	.363	22.813	JS	.514	6.570**
				SDH	.392	5.253**
				JS*SDH	.226	2.889**

**p<.01

JS: Job Stress; SDH: Self-defeating Humor

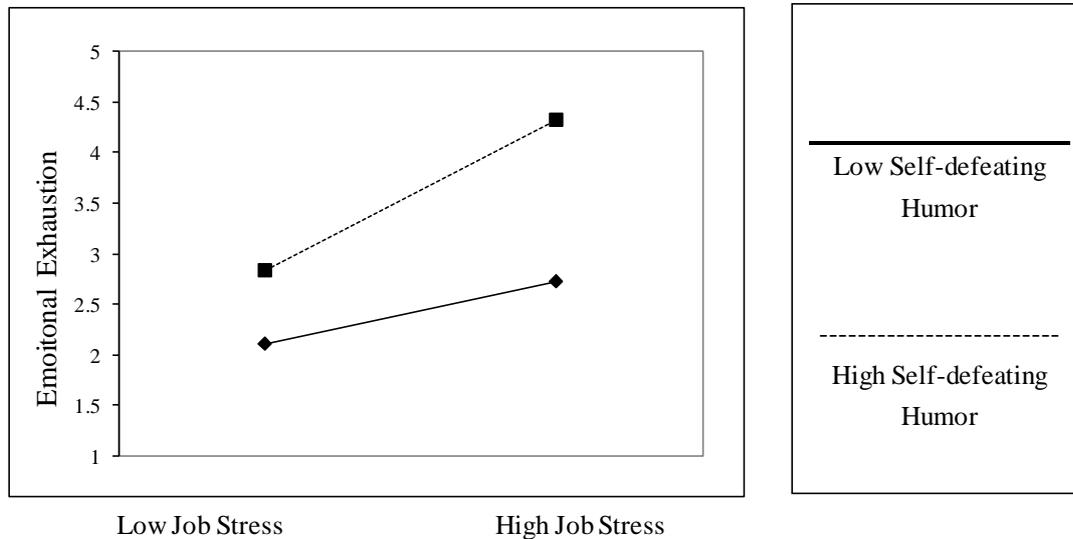


Figure 4. Interaction of Job Stress and Self-Defeating Humor on Emotional Exhaustion

According to the results of hierarchical regression analysis, aggressive humor doesn't have a moderating effect on the relationship between job stress and emotional exhaustion. (See Table 5).

Table 5. Regression Analysis for the Moderator Role of Aggressive Humor between Job Stress and Emotional Exhaustion

Model	R ²	ΔR ²	F		β	t
1	.189	.181	26.485	JS	.434	5.146**
2	.208	.194	14.845	JS	.457	5.385**
				AGH	.142	1.670
3	.216	.195	10.259	JS	.454	5.358**
				AGH	.138	1.628
				JS*AGH	.087	1.034

**p<.01

JS: Job Stress; AGH: Aggressive Humor

4. Discussion

Job stress and emotional exhaustion are undesirable factors in workplace that have negative effects not only on organizational results but also on employees' health. The results of this study revealed that some types of humor styles have the potential to make some changes on the relationship between these two variables. It seems that self-enhancing humor creates some kind of power to cope with the effects of job stress and emotional exhaustion. According to the results, self-enhancing humor reduces the strength of the relationship between job stress and emotional exhaustion. Self-defeating humor on the other hand, seems to have an adverse effect. It enhances the strength of the relationship between job stress and emotional exhaustion. In other words, as the level of self-enhancing humor increases, the effect of job stress on emotional exhaustion is decreased, on the other hand, as the level of self-defeating humor increases, the effect of job stress on emotional exhaustion is increased.

Earlier studies showed that adaptive components of humor, namely, affiliative and self-enhancing humor, are negatively correlated with anxiety and depression (Labbot ve Martin, 1987; Overholser, 1992; Nezu et al., 1988); while maladaptive components, namely, aggressive and self-defeating humor are positively correlated with anxiety and depression (Martin et al., 2003; Kuiper et al., 2004; Frewen et al., 2008). Tucker et al. (2013), stated that affiliative humor weakens the relationship between social anxiety and depression, while self-defeating humor strengthen this relationship. They suggested that adaptive humor components, like affiliative humor, can protect people with social anxiety against depression. In this study, it was found that another adaptive component of humor, namely self-enhancing humor, can be protective against emotional exhaustion among employees with high job stress. Self-defeating humor on the other hand, causes harm in terms of emotional exhaustion for employees with high job stress. These humor styles are related to personality (Martin et al., 2003). From this point of view, it is difficult to change these characteristics of employees, but it can be helpful to make them aware of this phenomenon. Self-enhancing humor is related to optimism, self-esteem, and positive affect (Karou-ei, Doosti, Dehshiri, & Heidari, 2009). These characteristics help employees to cope with stressful events in workplace, so that they experience less emotional exhaustion compared to employees who do not possess these characteristics. Wellenzohn, Proyer and Ruch (2016) used humor as a positive psychology intervention and

they make the subjects to write down three funny things that happened during the day. They revealed that in one week depressive symptoms of the subjects were decreased. The use of positive humor styles (affiliative and self-enhancing humor) helps to overcome the discomfort caused by the stressful events in life (Martin et al., 2003). Stockton et al. (2016) found that there is a positive correlation between self-enhancing humor and reasons for living. According to Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, individuals have resources like personal characteristics, conditions, energy resources, objects, and they have a natural tendency to obtain, retain and enhance these resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Hobfoll (2001) put forward a list of 74 resources which are valued elements for individuals and "sense of humor" was one of them. If people lose or not able to retain these resources they are stressed. And if they believe that they do not have adequate emotional resources to cope with stressors around them they are emotionally exhausted (Lee & Ashforth, 1996). Humor can also be thought as a resource which helps to maintain this emotional balance. It can be regarded as a personal resource in life and also in workplace.

This study makes contributions to the understanding of the functions of humor styles in work life. The scope of the study is limited to the effects of humor styles on job stress and emotional exhaustion. Affiliative and aggressive humor styles didn't have any moderating effects on the relationship between job stress and emotional exhaustion in this study. Future studies could examine the effects of affiliative and aggressive humor styles on other variables which are related to job stress. Affiliative humor is also a benign humor style like self-enhancing humor. It is important to understand the ways how benign humor styles can help to reduce job stress and create an opportunity to improve the workplace environment.

In conclusion, if someone, who has a stressful job, does have a self-enhancing humor style, he/she will be less emotionally exhausted than someone, who doesn't have this type of humor style. On the other hand, if someone has a stressful job and also a self-defeating humor style, he/she will be more emotionally exhausted than someone, who doesn't have this type of humor style. Today's work conditions generally do not offer an environment without job stress therefore it is important to have resources which can reduce the negative effects of stress. Humor seems to be a useful tool to cope with the difficult circumstances in workplace, especially when they are unavoidable.

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