

Humor as a Form of Coping Behavior among Russian Students

Tatiana Vasilyevna Artemyeva

Kazan (Volga region) Federal University, Kazan, Russia

Abstract: This paper is focused on analyzing the studies devoted to coping using humor. The ability of humor to change person's perception of the world and oneself, to changes one's attitude towards to the situation and to transform emotions using reflective actions is noted. The Coping Humor Scale proposed by R. Martin and G. Lefcourt was used to study sense of humor as a trait reducing stress. This method made it possible to reveal the extent of using humor by Russian students in case of stressful life events. No gender differences in using humor by young people have been revealed. Students who actively use humor are more likely to employ active and straightforward strategies for coping with stressogenic situations. The efficiency of using humor to cope with and resolve unfavorable situations depends not only on adequate choice of a strategy but also on personal traits of students: their self-concept, self-control, extraversion, anxiety and level of subjective control. The students who are more confident and independent use humor more actively.

Key words: Humor • Coping • Students • Strategies to cope with stressogenic events

INTRODUCTION

The research conducted by Russian and foreign scientists demonstrates convincingly that the high level of stressful events, such as natural disasters, interpersonal conflicts, busy working schedule and financial problems, has a negative effect on mental and physical health as it may cause negative results, such as emotional and behavioral disorders and cognitive inefficiency [1, 2].

Continuous exposure to unfavorable stressful factors causes personality changes (destructions and deformations). Such qualities as hesitation, anxiety, apathy and fatigue develop under chronic stress conditions [3, 4].

The problem of resistance to stress has been discussed by Western European researchers using the concept "coping" (from "cope", which has the meaning "to deal successfully with, to overcome" according to the Oxford English Dictionary). In Russian psychology, the term "coping" is included in the structure of stress and is interpreted as psychological overcoming or controlling, comprising a combination of methods and approaches for overcoming disadaptation and stress conditions. The term "coping" includes various forms of human activity; it covers all the types of interaction

between an individual and the internal or external tasks, difficulties that need to be overcome, avoided, controlled, or mitigated [5].

An assumption has been made in psychological literature that the ability of a person to use humor to respond to stress is an efficient and significant coping strategy. People with a well-developed sense of humor tend to overcome stress using various reflective actions and coping strategies, including cognitive restructuring and controlling emotions [6, 7].

The researchers believe that during the evolution people began to use humor as a tool for cognitive control over a number of events and situations that had threatened their well-being, transforming them into something insignificant and ridiculous [8]. Since humor is based on considering contradictions and different interpretations, it can help a person to change his/her attitude to the stress situation by re-evaluating it from the new, less threatening, point of view. This humorous re-evaluation helps to make the situation less stressful and controllable [9].

The positive emotion of joy, which accompanies humor, replaces the feelings of anxiety, depression and anger, which could have emerged in a stress situation. This allows a person to think wider and solve the problems in a flexible manner [10].

Fredrickson and Levenson believe that the positive emotion has a physiologically favorable effect as it accelerates one's rehabilitation from the cardiovascular effects of any negative emotions that could have been induced by stress. Thus, humor can be regarded as an important mechanism for controlling emotions, which can contribute to improving one's mental health [11].

Walter O'Connell described humorous people as being "skilled in rapid perceptual-cognitive switches in frames of reference"; this ability probably allows them to re-evaluate the problematic situation, to distance themselves from the direct threat and thus to reduce the paralyzing feelings of anxiety and helplessness [12].

When one laughs at other people or the situations that are typically regarded as threatening or limiting, a person can feel free of the threat, thus experiencing positive feelings of well-being and power. As H. Kallen wrote, "I either laugh at things that used to be dangerous or humiliated me, or try to neutralize, to enthrall, or destroy things that I like but failed at. My laughter indicates this failure and my own liberation" [13].

Humor is usually used to overcome problems in social context. People typically neither laugh nor joke about their problems when being alone. Humor is usually transformed into jokes and laughter when one communicates with other people either during an unfavorable situation or soon after it. For instance, when in the evening a group of friends discuss the events that took place during a stressful day and the problems that used to seem distressful and exorbitant, the stressful situations can be perceived as being ridiculous and give grounds for merry-making and loud laughter. The stronger the emotional excitement and strain caused by stressful events, the greater the joy and louder the laughter at these events is [14].

The research conducted by Ford, Spaulding, Franki and Henman demonstrate that humor regarding the oppressors at concentration camps was often an important tool for maintaining group solidarity and moral spirits, for retaining the feeling of one's superiority, which gives one a chance to survive in a seemingly hopeless situation. The less extreme examples of humor capabilities as a means of overcoming difficulties and strokes of misfortune can be seen in everyday lives of many people. Humor and laughter help cancer patients to maintain an optimistic mood. When people laugh at problems in their lives, thus transforming them into objects of a humorous game, humor makes it possible not to give up to pressure of people and situations threatening our well-being.

Making fun of stupidity, incompetence and other imperfections of other people that make them indignant and irritate or impede approaching the goal can minimize sufferings of the people [15].

Thus, it is emphasized in psychological studies that during the evolution humor has started to be used as a tool to cope with difficulties and problems, which helps people to rapidly restore physical and mental power, to change the perception of the world and a person and to transform the attitude of a person to the situation.

METHODS

R. Martin and G. Lefcourt have developed the Coping Humor Scale (CHS) to study the sense of humor as a trait reducing stress [16]. This method is focused on a single function of humor: the extent of using humor for coping with stress. Because of the absence of diagnostic tools for revealing using humor for coping among Russian-language respondents, we have modified the American version of the method for revealing coping using humor and identified the features of coping behavior among students who actively use humor in stressful situations.

Main Body: A total of 270 students from full- and part-time departments of the Kazan (Volga Region) Federal University participated in the study. The following indices for the scales were obtained: $M = 21.17$; $S = 3.59$; $Me = 21$.

218 young women ($M = 21.36$; $S = 3.56$; $Me = 22$) and 52 young men ($M = 20.38$; $S = 3.69$; $Me = 21$) participated in the experiment. The score obtained by female students using the Humor Coping Scale is insignificantly higher than that obtained by male students ($t = 1.77$; $p < 0.05$).

A total of 114 students (76 young women and 38 young men) aged 17–38 (mean age = 20.48; standard deviation = 4.43) participated in the study at the next stage. The students were invited to answer the statements in the Coping Humor Scale (CHS) and the Eysenck Personality Inventory (EPI). The experiments have demonstrated that the total score for the Coping Humor Score have a weak negative relationship to the neuroticism scale in the Eysenck Personality Inventory ($r = -0.20$) and to the introversion scale ($r = 0.470$, $p < 0.01$). The results were used to divide the students under study into two groups. Group 1 consisted of 58 students in whom the indices obtained according to the CHS turned out to be higher than the median values ($Me = 22$). Group 2 comprised 56 students in whom this index was lower

than 22. It was found that the students who frequently use humor in stressful situations have higher score for the “Extraversion” scale ($M = 14.60$ and $M = 12.04$; $t = 3.46$, $p < 0.001$), while their score for the “Neuroticism” scale is lower than that in students who rarely use humor under stressful conditions. The resulting data are in agreement with the results of studies by R. Martin and H. Lefcourt obtained for American students: those who had high score for the CHS scale (i.e., people who frequently use humor in stressful situations) are people-oriented to more extent, communicative, shows good adaptability to the environment, are self-confident, even-tempered and determined.

84 individuals (67 women and 17 men) aged 17–44 years (mean age $M = 23.33$; standard deviation $S = 5.73$) participated in the further study. The students filled out the modified Coping Humor Scale and the Personality Inventory (the version modified at the V.M. Bekhterev Scientific Research Institute). The total score for the CHS scale correlate positively with the “Activity” ($r = 0.427$; $p = 0.01$) and “Strength” factors ($r = 0.339$, $p = 0.05$). A very weak positive association between the CHS results and the “Evaluation” factor was detected. The data obtained at this stage of the study were analyzed by dividing them into two groups: the responds obtained from 44 students whose score for the CHS scale were equal or higher than the median value ($Me = 22$) and those obtained from 41 students with the score below the median value. It turned out that the individuals with high and low CHS score differ significantly for two factors of the Personality Inventory: the “Activity” ($M = 9.81$ and $M = 7.02$; $t = 2.06$; $p < 0.01$) and “Strength” ($M = 8.72$ and $M = 6.07$; $t = 2.31$; $p < 0.01$) factors. These results attest to the fact that students with high CHS score are active, communicative, self-confident, independent and tend to rely on themselves in stressful situations.

Next, these students responded to the statements of the SACS scale, the Russian-language version of the method proposed by S. Hobfoll (translated and adapted by N.E. Vodop'yanova and E.S. Starchenkova). The total CHS score positively correlated with the active strategy of coping with stressful situations (assertive actions) ($r = 0.336$; $p = 0.01$) and the straightforward strategy (impulsive actions) ($r = 0.243$; $p = 0.05$). Weak negative association was detected between the CHS score and the pro-social strategy (searching for social support), non-straightforward strategy (manipulative actions) and asocial strategy (aggressive actions). The results of comparison have demonstrated that students who have

high CHS score more frequently use active ($M = 20.72$ and $M = 18.42$; $t = 3.20$; $p < 0.001$) and straightforward strategies ($M = 20.05$ and $M = 18.15$; $t = 2.43$, $p < 0.001$) for coping with stressful situations. The aggressive strategy (pressure, giving up searching for any alternative solutions, confrontation, competition) and manipulating other people under stressful conditions are less typical of this group.

CONCLUSIONS

Foreign researchers have accumulated a vast body of theoretical and experimental data, which allows one to study the capabilities of humor in coping with stress. Unfortunately, great attention to humor as a tool for coping with stress, the features of its manifestation and development in children and adults has been observed in Russia only during the past decade.

The modified procedure of R. Martin and G. Lefcourt allowed us to reveal the features of using humor for coping with stress among Russian students.

It has been found during the study that the score obtained by Russian students according to the Coping Humor Scale correlate positively with extraversion, orientation to the external world of people, commutability, good adaptability to the environment, self-confidence; the negative relationship between humor and neuroticism has also been revealed. It has been ascertained in this study that students who obtained high score according to the Coping Humor Scale are more active, communicative, self-confident, independent and tend to rely on themselves in difficult situations.

Russian students who use humor as a protective mechanism to cope with stress typically have an adequate self-concept, accept themselves as a personality, tend to think of themselves as of people having positive and socially desirable characteristics; they are characterized by a high level of self-control, commutability, spontaneity and activity.

On the contrary, students experiencing difficulty understanding humor are self-critical, dissatisfied by their own behavior and the level of accomplishments. They are characterized by an insufficient level of self-acceptance, depend on external factors and evaluation, are characterized by certain passivity and calm emotional responses.

It seems to be rather promising to study and reveal the age differences in using humor in stressful situations.

Summary:

- No gender differences for using humor by young people in stressful situations have been detected.
- Students who actively use humor in stressful everyday situations are more likely to use active and straightforward strategies for overcoming stressogenic situations. They less frequently choose aggressive strategies (pressure, refusal to search for alternative solutions, confrontation and competition) and manipulating other people under stressful conditions.
- The efficiency of using humor to cope with and resolve unfavorable situations depends not only on adequate choice of a strategy but on personal traits of students as well (i.e., their self-concept, self-control, extraversion, anxiety and level of subjective control). Students who are more self-confident, independent and enthusiastic use humor more actively.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to express her sincere gratitude to the students who kindly agreed to participate in study and to her research supervisor, Larisa Faritovna Bayanova, for assistance and support.

REFERENCES

1. Jonson, A.K. and E.A. Anderson, 1990. Stress and arousal. In Principles of psychophysiology: Physical, social and inferential elements, Eds., Cacioppo, J.T. and L.G. Tassinari. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, pp: 216-252.
2. Sanderson, C.A., 2004. Health psychology. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley. Sanville, J.B., 1999. Humor and play. In Humor and psyche: Psychoanalytic perspectives, Ed., Barron, J.W. Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press, pp: 31-55.
3. Kitaev-Smyk, L.A., 1983. Psychology of Stress. Moscow: Nauka. In Russian.
4. Leonova, A.B., 2000. Main approaches to studying occupational stress. Moscow State Univ. Bull. Ser. 14: Psychology: 4-21. In Russian.
5. Vodop'yanova, N.E., 2009. Psychodiagnostics of Stress, pp: 170-176. In Russian.
6. Artem'eva, T.V. and A.O. Il'ina, 2012. Understanding of humor and dialectic actions – study of the relationship. Education and Self-Development-Kazan: Center of Innovative Technologies, 5(33): 114-117. In Russian.
7. Lefcourt, H.M., 2001. Humor: The psychology of living buoyantly. New York: Kluwer Academic.
8. Dixon, N.F., 1980. Humor: A cognitive alternative to stress? In Stress and anxiety, Eds., Sarason, I.G. and C.D. Spielberger. Washington, D.C.: Hemisphere, pp: 281-189.
9. Kuiper, N.A., R.A. Martin and L.J. Olinger, 1993. Coping humor, stress and cognitive appraisals. Canadian Journal of Behavioral Science, 25(1): 81-96.
10. Fredrickson, B.L., 2001. The role of positive emotion in positive psychology: The broaden – and – build theory of positive emotion. American Psychologist, 55(3): 218-226.
11. Fredrickson, B.L. and R.W. Levenson, 1998. Positive emotions speed recovery from the cardiovascular sequelae of negative emotions. Cognition and Emotion, 12(2): 191-220.
12. O'Connell, W.E., 1976. Freudian humor: The eupsychia of everyday life. In Humor and laughter: Theory, research and application, Eds., Chapman A.J. and H.C. Foot. London: John Wiley & Sons, pp: 313-329.
13. Kallen, H.M., 1968. Liberty, laughter and tears: Reflection on the relations of comedy and tragedy to human freedom. DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press.
14. Martin, R., 2009. Psychology of Humor. St. Petersburg: Piter. In Russian.
15. Martin, R.A., 2003. Sense of humor. In Positive psychological assessment: A handbook of models and measures, Eds., Lopez, S.J. and C.R. Snyder. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, pp: 313-326.
16. Martin, R.A., 1996. The Situational Humor Response Questionnaire (SHRQ) and Coping Humor Scale (CHS): A decade of research findings. Humor: International Journal of Humor Research, 9(3-4): 251-272.