The Relationship between Humorous Coping Skills and the Initial Personal-Emotional Adjustment of College Freshmen Enrolled in a Small Southwestern Evangelical Christian University

Jennifer Burgoyne, Julie Cole, & Gregory P. Hickman
The Pennsylvania State University - Fayette

Abstract

Using self-report questionnaire data, the Coping Humor Scale and Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire were administered to 77 college freshmen enrolled in a small Southwestern Evangelical Christian University. Researchers examined the influence of humorous coping skills (i.e., independent variable) on the personal-emotional adjustment to college (i.e., dependent variable) of college freshmen. Using correlational analysis, a substantial positive correlation was found between humorous coping skills and the personal-emotional adjustment of college freshmen ($r = .51$, $p < .01$). Implications are drawn for those who service the needs of higher learning.
The transition a person undergoes upon matriculation to college entails a substantial amount of personal, emotional, and academic adjustment (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Hickman & Andrews, in press; Tinto, 2000). Researchers have reported that roughly 60% of freshmen drop out of college within the first two years (Tinto, 2000). The academic rigors of a college environment, development of a completely new and different social network and environment, and possibly a change in a student’s living arrangements are among a few of the added personal and emotional stressors college students face during this transition. The question remains, how do students come to cope with such personal and emotional stressors during this transition?

Researchers have examined a wide variety of possible individual-level predictors of adjustment to college, including coping styles (Clark & Hovanitz, 1989; Kirsch, Mearns, & Catanzaro, 1990), problem-solving skills (Heppner & Anderson, 1985; Nezu & Ronan, 1988), personality characteristics such as self-esteem (Cantor, Norem, Niedenthal, Langston, & Brower, 1987), assertiveness (Elliot & Gramling, 1990), optimism (Darvill & Johnson, 1991), and sense of mastery (Felsten & Wilcox, 1992). The findings from these studies suggest that coping strategies, regardless of their nature, appear to be indicators of adaptation associated with one’s transition to college (Brooks & Dubois, 1995).

Although the aforementioned coping mechanisms have been found useful in adaptation and adjustment to college (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1992), humor as a coping mechanism on the initial personal and emotional adjustment to college has been understudied. However, humor as a variable of study has surfaced in clinical arenas such as therapy (Dixon, 1997), personality exploration (Galinkin, 2000), psychological case studies among clowns and comedians (Damicco & Purkey, 1978; Fisher & Fisher, 1981), explanations of creativity among gifted children (Clabby, 1980; Klavir & Gorodetsky, 2001), and even explanations for successful teaching
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methods (Berk & Nanda, 1998). Furthermore, research tends to explain how humor is related to genetics (Manke, 1998), aggressiveness (Wright, 2000), laughter (Abel & Maxwell, 2002), joke telling (Lefcourt & Martin, 1986), and as well as improving the quality of life (Cousins, 1989; Fry, 1992). Moreover, some research has focused on how individuals employ humor to cope with emotional and stressful situations (Abel & Maxwell, 2002; Martin & Lefcourt, 1983).

Given that incoming college freshmen are exposed to new surroundings indicative of increased freedom and responsibility (Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Larsen, & Jacobs, 1997; Mallinckrodt, 1988; Roberts, 1995), it seems inherent that college students might experience some levels of stress, anxiety, and emotional turmoil previously not encountered in their lives. Given the long line of research history on humor (Freud, 1905; Spencer, 1860), it seems plausible that humor, although often forgotten, may play a germane role as a coping mechanism on the initial personal-emotional adjustment of college freshmen. This study attempts to extend previous research (e.g., Hickman & Andrews, in press), which examined humorous coping skills and initial overall college adjustment of college freshmen enrolled in a large secular Midwestern University. Moreover, this study attempts to add to the literature by examining the relationship between humorous coping skills and initial personal-emotional adjustment of freshmen college students enrolled in a small Southwestern Evangelical Christian University.

Humor and Coping Ability

Despite the paucity of research in the role of humor in a collegiate setting, the arena of humor from an epidemiological perspective dates back over 100 years to the seminal work of Spencer (1860) who charged that humor is a release of built-up tension and energy. Borrowing from Spencer, Freud expanded this theoretical view of humor by examining the role of humor as a coping mechanism (Freud, 1905). As noted by Freud (1928), humor serves as a stress-reducing
mechanism in contexts where the person normally experiences negative emotions. Freud (1928) further noted that humor allows that person to alter his/her perspective in a positive manner despite experiencing negative contexts. Therefore, humor is the ultimate defense mechanism as it allows individuals to face stressful and uncertain situations without being overwhelmed by negative emotions (Freud, 1928).

Psychological theories of humor typically fall into three categories: (a) Tension-Relief, (b) Superiority, and (c) Incongruity. In his 1905 book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Sigmund Freud discussed how jokes (especially those that are sexual and/or hostile) may serve a cathartic function by relieving tension, especially with taboo topics. Thus, humor allows us to express nonconstructive impulses in a more socially constructive manner (Freud, 1905).

The superiority theories emphasize how people use humor to laugh at the misfortunes and foibles of others. For example, studies have shown that subjects will find a joke funnier if aimed at a person or group that they do not like (Wicker, Thorelli, Barron, & Willis, 1981; Zillmann, Bryant, & Cantor, 1974). Finally, the incongruity theories focus on cognitive mechanisms to explain why jokes are funny, especially the elements of surprise and resolution (Barron, 1980).

Central to these theories is the controversy of whether or not humor is adaptive. Is a sense of humor adaptive in that it helps people cope with stressors, or, as Plato viewed humor, is it simply a device of the weak to laugh at the weaker (Piddington, 1963). Ketih-Spiegel (1972) acknowledged that while many humor theorists have given considerable attention to superiority humor, and thus treat humor as a basic instinct of man, many theorists have regarded humor and laughter as representative of the best in man, reflective of goodness and love.
One positive outcome of having a good sense of humor is the ability to cope with stressful situations. Martin and Lefcourt (1983) created the Coping Humor Scale (CHS) to examine humor’s function as a “stress moderator.” Although the evidence from several studies reveals contradictory findings, there does seem to be a trend that humor helps individuals to cope with stressful situations (Martin & Lefcourt, 1983; Nezu, Nezu, & Blissett, 1988) and aids in combating depression (Porterfield, 1987). Other research has found that students who scored high on the CHS were more likely to perceive an exam as challenging, rather than threatening (Martin & Lefcourt, 1983). Moreover, the CHS was positively correlated with two subscales from the Ways of Coping Scale (Kuiper, Martin, & Olinger, 1993). Thus, evidence suggests that humor may foster the ability to cope with stressors. Given such findings, it seems plausible that incoming college freshmen that score high on the CHS should be better able to adapt to the rigors of freshman life.

*Humor and Academics*

Overall, the body of literature examining humor and college adjustment has been scarce. Indeed, the majority of research examining humor and academic achievement/adjustment is outdated or has been aimed at the primary and secondary educational levels (Pellegrini, Masten, Garmezy, & Ferrarese, 1987) or at examining the role of humor in pedagogical teaching methods (Ziv, 1988; Berk & Nanda, 1998).

Ziv (1988) found that when educators employed humor in the classroom setting students actually performed better and achieved higher grades. However, Prerost (1983) found that classroom humor did not improve exam scores, although it did influence overall attitudes towards the course. Berk and Nanda (1998) examined the effects of humor as an educational teaching strategy to reduce tension and anxiety and increase achievement. Results demonstrated
that those students in the experimental group (i.e., humor group) demonstrated better attitudes toward the course and held less anxiety (Berk, 1996; Berk & Nanda, 1998). In addition, Adair and Sieger (1984) found that college students who demonstrated higher levels of humor actually performed better on classroom task performances. Moreover, recent research has found humor to be a protective factor of academic achievement and adjustments among aggressive and emotionally disturbed at-risk youth (Vance, Fernandez, & Biber, 1998).

Although it seems plausible that humor may play a germane role in the academic achievement and adjustment among college students, other research would suggest otherwise (Perlini, Nenonen, & Lind, 1999). For example, Perlini et al. (1999) examined the moderating effects of coping humor in relation to test anxiety and performance. Contrary to prior theoretical beliefs (e.g., Freud, 1905), highly humorous individuals did not reduce their levels of anxiety and consequently did not perform better on tests. Perlini et al. (1999) suggest that individual differences in generating humor rather than the use of humor as a coping strategy may better predict examination scores. In another study, Townsend and Mahoney (1981) administered the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory and an achievement test to a sample of 106 college undergraduates. Half of their sample received additional humorous items on the achievement test while the other half of the sample did not receive the additional items. Results demonstrated that highly anxious students had lower achievement on the humorous items than on the nonhumorous items and individuals with low anxiety had higher achievement on the humorous items than individuals with high anxiety (Townsend & Mahoney, 1981). Again, given such inconsistent findings, further exploration of the relationship between humor and initial college adjustment is warranted.

Research Question
This study sought to examine the question, does humorous coping skills influence initial personal-emotional adjustment among college freshmen enrolled in a small Evangelical Christian University.

Method

Participants

Questionnaire data was provided by a sample of 77 entering male and female college freshmen enrolled in Introductory Psychology courses at a small (i.e., less than 2000 total student enrollment) private Liberal Arts Southwestern University. Female participants consisted of 61.0% of the sample. Male participants consisted of the remaining 39.0% of the sample. The mean age was 20.69 years. The sample was mainly Caucasian (64.9%), consistent with the ethnic distribution of the college. In addition, Hispanic (10.4%), African American (6.5%), American Indian (6.5%), and other (11.7%) students made up the remainder of the sample. See Table 1 for complete summary.

Procedures

Students were group-administered surveys during Introductory Psychology classes. Students were informed of the procedures of the study and were informed of their ethical rights to be involved in this study. All volunteer participants of this study were screened to ensure that they were freshmen enrolled for their first year experience in college. The students were handed the questionnaire and given class time to complete the data. To increase participation students were given extra credit for filling out the survey. Given the time in class to complete the survey’s and the extra credit awarded, the study resulted in all 77 freshmen students from two different classes turning in their surveys. To further enhance the study, the primary investigator examined for complete surveys. All participants completed the surveys. Data provided by each participant
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included general demographic information, as well as measures of humor and student adjustment to college.

Measures

Humorous Coping Skills. Humor was assessed by using the Coping Humor Scale (CHS) (Martin & Lefcort, 1983). A four-point, Lickert-type scale was used. Answers ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Participants were asked to report how humor plays into certain situations. Sample statements included, “I often lose my sense of humor when I’m having problems”, and “I can usually find something to laugh or joke about even in trying situations”. The responses from all seven statements were collapsed, summated, and used to calculate a mean humor score. The reliability of the Coping Humor Scale for this study was moderate, with data yielding a Cronbach’s alpha of .55.

Adjustment to College. Adjustment was assessed by using the 67-item Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ), (Baker & Siryk, 1989). This measure has four subscales: Academic Adjustment, Social Adjustment, Personal-Emotional Adjustment, and Goal Commitment-Institutional Adjustment. Given the nature of humor and emotions, only the Personal-Emotional (SACQPERS) subscale was used for this study. Answers ranged from 1 (doesn’t apply to me at all) to 9 (applies very close to me). Sample statements included, “I have been feeling tense or nervous lately”, and “Lately, I have been feeling blue and moody a lot”. The reliability of the SACQPERS subscale for this study was high, with data yielding a Cronbach’s Alpha of .72.

Results

The means and standard deviations of the independent variable (i.e., humor) and the dependent variable (i.e., personal-emotional adjustment) are shown in Table 2. Correlational
analysis provided support for the researchers’ hypothesis. More specifically, using Pearson’s Product Moment Correlation Coefficient, a substantial positive correlation was found between the independent variable humorous coping skills and the dependent variable personal-emotional adjustment to college ($r = .51, p < .01$) among college freshmen. See Table 3 for correlation matrix of the variables of study.

Discussion

There are several limitations inherent within this study. First, this study did not utilize random selection. Rather, this study incorporated a purposive sampling procedure. However, given that this study sought freshmen only, this method of sampling is appropriate. Second, this study is correlational in nature. Without a control group from which to make comparisons, cause and effect differences remain absent. Future studies should look to establish a control group to gain a better understanding of the role of humor as it relates to initial college adjustment. Third, this study did not incorporate a longitudinal study. Given that the design of this study examined the participant’s initial adjustment at one point in time, determination of long-term adjustment was not obtainable. Future research should examine the long-term effects of humor and college adjustment. Finally, this study used self-report data. Perhaps a social bias of representing oneself in a humorous manner was present in this study.

Despite such limitations, these results of this study suggest that humor plays a germane role in the initial personal-emotional adjustment to college life. Although a myriad of factors play a role in the level of success and adaptation of college students, the results of this study are noteworthy because a student’s emotional state of mind might potentially be an extremely important factor that “sets the tone” for other indices of adjustment.
This study extended research of the third author on college adjustment by examining the role of humor and personal-emotional adjustment as opposed to initial overall college adjustment. In addition, this study extended research on humor in that the authors examined college freshmen enrolled in a conservative Evangelical Christian University. Prior research by Hickman and Andrews (in press) found that humor was positively related to initial overall adjustment in a sample from a large liberal Midwestern University. Interestingly, the correlation of humor to college adjustment was stronger \( r = .51, p < .01 \) in a small conservative Christian college milieu than a large liberal Midwestern University environment. Perhaps, those college freshmen enrolled at the Evangelical Christian University experienced more conservative and enmeshing socialization strategies that resulted in fewer coping strategies compared to those freshmen that attended the more liberal and secular Midwestern University. Future studies should incorporate experimental between subject’s designs to ferret out such differences.

**Conclusions & Implications**

Expectations from professors, parents, and even the students themselves can lead to stress overload. How students find a way to deal and cope with this stress is of utmost importance. Although research demonstrates that there are different methods of coping with emotional anxiety, this study demonstrates the importance of using humor as a means of coping with stress and anxiety associated with the rigors of college life. Indeed, the ability for college students to employ humor is crucial. If a student gets too emotionally down, problems such as academic failure could result. Consequently, academic failure can lead to academic dismissal and/or the student feeling incapable of meeting the demands of college academics. Stress, anxiety, and uncertainty are unavoidable and are basic tenets of college life. Perhaps, a strong
sense of humor may provide enough coping ability to allow the student to progress forward in their academic endeavors.

While humor may not be appropriate in every situation within the college environment, its effects are suggested to be beneficial for a student’s personal and emotional adjustment. Future studies should look to examine the timing of humor and how and why student’s use humor to cope with the rigors of college adjustment. Although this study would suggest that using humor to relieve stress can be positive, it may be possible for humor to be inappropriate at times and ineffective for coping with stress. For example, some students may use humor as an avoidant strategy for a serious situation. Further, some students may joke about their stress and anxiety in order to avoid facing the reality of the situation. Future research on humor as a coping mechanism for college life should be examined across various domains.

Finally, this study has implications for those who service the needs of higher learning. College counselors, advisors, faculty members, and program designers should be aware of the influence of humor on personal-emotional adjustment. Counselors and advisors who attempt to increase college adjustment might want to incorporate the benefits of humor into their daily interactions with college freshmen. College program designers could design orientation sessions and programs that incorporate and inject humor as part of the curriculum. Faculty members might want to consider adding a little touch of humor to their classroom lectures and discussions. Research has demonstrated that students performed better in classes when teachers instilled laughter and humor in the classroom setting (Barron, 1992; Ziv, 1988). Finally, follow-up studies and longitudinal studies should be designed as students progress through the semesters of their college tenure in order to aid in any further problems with adjustment.
Author Notes

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Gregory P. Hickman, Ph.D., The Pennsylvania State University - Fayette, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Route 119N, Box 519, Uniontown, PA 15401. E-mail: gph10@psu.edu, 724.850.7799

References


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humor appreciation. *Journal of Research in Personality, 7*, 334-345.


Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics for Background Characteristics*

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Marital Status

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Table 2

*Means and Standard Deviations of Variables of Study*

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<th>SD</th>
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<td>Humorous Coping Skills</td>
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<td>.44</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal-Emotional Adjustment to College</td>
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<td>1.37</td>
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Table 3

*Correlation Matrix of Variables of Study*

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<th>Variable</th>
<th>SACQPERs</th>
<th>Humor</th>
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<tr>
<td>SACQPERs</td>
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<td>.510*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humor</td>
<td>.510*</td>
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</table>

* Correlation is significant p < .01