

## **Humor as a Human Resource Tool in Organizations**

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## Table of Contents

<b>1.</b>	Introduction .....	2
1.1	Background and scope of this review.....	2
1.2	Academic setting .....	2
<b>2.</b>	Conceptualization: The Egg model .....	5
<b>3.</b>	Individual sense of humor and outcomes (micro level) .....	7
<b>4.</b>	Work group and organizational humor use and outcomes (meso level) .....	10
4.1	Humor within work groups or teams (lateral effects) .....	11
4.2	Humor within hierarchical relationships (lateral effects) .....	12
4.3	Humor as communication vehicle and reflection of organizational culture .	14
<b>5.</b>	Humor use in the broader arena .....	16
<b>6.</b>	Assessment and intervention .....	16
<b>7.</b>	Conclusion and Discussion .....	18
7.1	Conclusion.....	18
7.2	Discussion and future research agenda .....	19
<b>8.</b>	References .....	21

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background and scope of this review

The production and consumption of humor are usually not considered a core asset of organizations and the individuals working in them. Employees are supposed to contribute to specific productive aims, not to a humorous climate in their organizations. However, individuals do bring humorous attitudes, materials and thoughts with them into the organization. Could this be useful and even productive for the individuals themselves and for their employers? In this review we will investigate this question. First, we will define (a sense of) humor. In this section we will also introduce the Egg model of organizational humor, which allows us to discuss the state of the art in humor at work as a resource in occupational health. Next, sense of humor in individuals will be described, as well as the social dimensions of the use of humor within companies. Assessment and intervention will be reviewed and our findings will be discussed, including a future research agenda.

### 1.2 Academic setting

Professional and academic interest in the role of humor in general fits into the larger trend towards positive psychology (e.g., Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003; Carr, 2004; Compton, 2005; Giacalone, Jurkiewicz, & Dunn, 2005; Peterson, 2006). Positive psychology has also entered the workplace, resulting in new concepts such as Positive Organizational Behavior (POB; e.g., Nelson & Cooper 2007), and Psychological Capital (PsyCap). In their review on POB, Luthans and Youssef (2007) distinguish between 1) positive *traits* (i.e., the Big Five personality traits, core self-evaluations and positive psychological traits), ii) positive *state-like capacities* (i.e., POB, self-efficacy, optimism, resiliency, PsyCap), iii) positive *organizations* employing positively oriented high-performance work practices with regard to placement, compensation, and motivation and the strategies, structures, and cultures underlying these practices, and iv) positive organizational *behaviors* resulting from the interaction of these positive traits, states and organizational factors, such as positive deviance.

Positive traits are characterized by stability over time and situations, whereas positive state-like capacities are more malleable and open to change and development (Luthans & Youssef, 2007). Several categorizations of positive psychological traits have been developed. Peterson and Seligman (2004), for example, classified 24

character strengths into six broad virtue categories: 1) wisdom and knowledge (e.g., creativity, curiosity), 2) courage (e.g., bravery, persistence), 3) humanity (e.g., love, kindness), 4) justice (e.g., citizenship, leadership), 5) temperance (e.g., forgiveness and mercy), and 6) transcendence (e.g., appreciation, hope, humor, and spirituality). Another categorization is given by Snyder and Lopez (2002), who classify positive psychological approaches as: a) emotion focused (e.g., subjective or psychological well-being, flow), b) cognition focused (e.g., self-efficacy, wisdom), c) self-based (e.g., authenticity, humility), d) interpersonal (e.g., forgiveness, gratitude), biological (e.g., toughness), and e) coping focused (e.g., humor, meditation, spirituality). This second classification system is in line with recent applications of positive psychology to the workplace (Luthans & Youssef, 2007).

Interestingly, both classification systems explicitly include humor and see similarities with spirituality. The category in which humor is placed, however, differs between the two systems: within Peterson and Seligman's (2004) categorization, humor is viewed as a transcendent trait used to rise above the reality of every day, whereas Snyder and Lopez' (2002) see as a coping focused positive psychological trait used to reduce levels of stress (or addressing stressors).

According to Luthans and Youssef (2007), positive psychological capacities open to investment and development (Luthans, Avey, Avolio, Norman, & Combs, 2006; Luthans & Youssef, 2007) may provide organizations with an unprecedented potential source of competitive advantage in their employees. This newly recognized resource draws its competitive advantage from its potential for development and performance impact. Avey, Luthans and Youssef (2010), for example, found that psychological capital was positively related to extra-role organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs) and negatively to organizational cynicism, intentions to quit, and counterproductive workplace behaviors.

An influential theoretical model fitting the positive psychology trend and presenting mechanisms through which positive traits or states may affect (work-related) behavior is Fredrickson's (1998; 2001) *Broaden-and-Build* theory of positive emotions. This model asserts that people's daily experiences of positive emotions compound over time to build a variety of personal resources by broadening an individual's momentary thought-action repertoire. The broadened mindsets arising from positive emotions are contrasted to the narrow mindsets sparked by negative emotions. The personal resources extended by positive emotions function as reserves

that can be drawn on later to improve the odds of successful coping and survival. In this chapter we will argue that humor may form a personal resource in itself or act as a trigger of other personal resources. We will, however, first attempt to define humor.

## **2. Conceptualization: The Egg model**

Defining humor is a daunting task and there is little agreement on what it is exactly. A number of basic approaches of this problem may be distinguished. A simple but circular definition is offered by Martineau, defining humor as “any communicative instance which is perceived as humorous” (Martineau, 1972, p. 114). Building on previous work in cognitive and social psychology, Martin (2007) describes humor as a cognitive-perceptual process that leads to an emotional response (mirth) and expression (laughter) in a social context. Overall, this is consistent with Gervais and Wilson’s (2005) evolutionary inspired definition of humor as non-serious social incongruity. Incongruity refers to the cognitive-perceptual process essential to humor, in which conflicting ideas, events or texts are combined (Frecknall, 1994; Martin, 2007; Clouse & Spurgeon, 1995; Wyer, 2004). This review will not go into depth with regard to incongruity (theory), because it is considered a basic cognitive process underlying all humorous expressions in organizations. Also, the forms these expressions may take (e.g. Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004) will not be the focus of this review.

Applying humor to an organizational setting, Cooper (2005) defined humor as “any event shared by an agent (e.g., employee) with another individual (i.e., a target) that is intended to be amusing to the target, and that the target perceives as an intentional act” (p. 767). Remarkably, the focus of this definition is on the intention to be amusing, not on funniness as such, implying that amusement may not always be the outcome of the process. Romero and Cruthirds (2006, p.59) define the target in Cooper’s definition as the individual, group, or organization (p. 59). Concluding, organizational humor may be defined as *non-serious incongruity shared in work settings aimed at the intentional amusement of individuals, groups or organizations*. This definition of organizational humor contains a) both the affective and cognitive aspects of humor (i.e., amusement or mirth and incongruity), b) the work-related setting, c) the different levels at which humor in the workplace may be expressed or communicated (i.e., individual, group, and organizational level), and d) the intentional nature of humor.

This definition is the starting point for a working model of humor in organizations which we have called the Egg model (see Figure 1). The model describes the communication levels mentioned in the definition and also allows for a systematic description of the interactions between these levels.

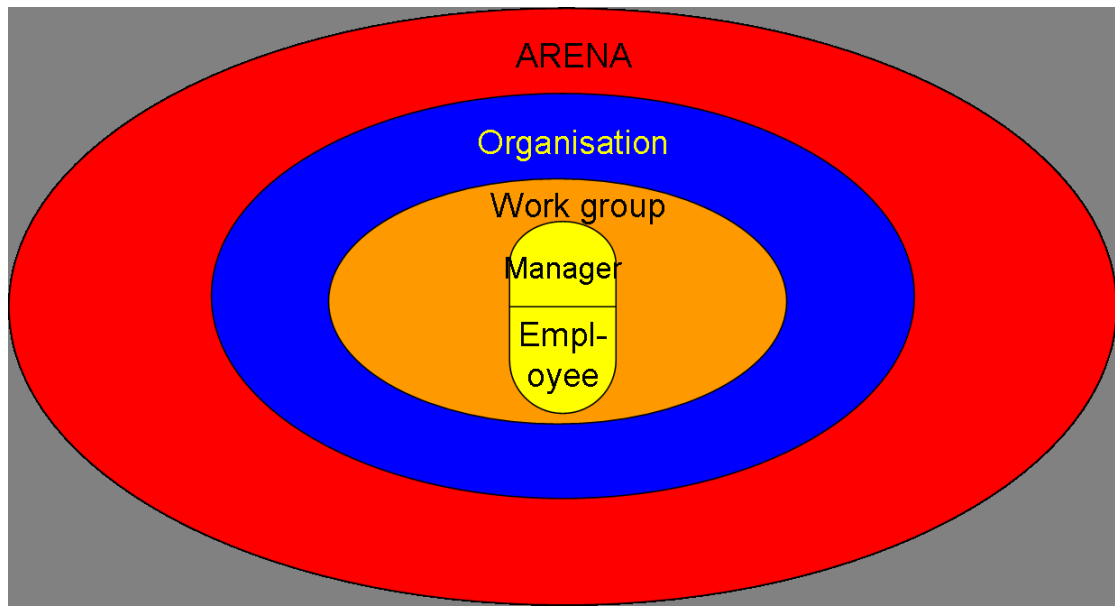


Figure 1: The Egg model of humor at work

The model presupposes that individuals (employees, managers) may be characterized by a sense of humor (1, 2) and organizations and its composing parts having humor cultures (3, 4). All this is embedded in a wider humor culture, which we have called the arena (5), which stands for humor culture in domains outside the organization like the country the organization finds itself in or the work domain the organization is set in (e.g. health care or competing businesses), which may have typical characteristics and developmental paths (see Bakas, 2007). Previous humor studies will now be presented following this model, starting with sense of humor and its associations with individual outcomes (micro-level; 1, 2), subsequently moving onto group- or organization-related use and effects of humor (meso-level; 3, 4), and finally placing humor within a broader cultural context (macro-level; 5). In other words, we will present previous empirical humor studies by going through the Egg model from the inside out.

### **3. Individual sense of humor and outcomes (micro level)**

A sense of humor is hardwired into our brains, as many fMRI studies have shown (e.g. Marinkovic et al., 2011). This corresponds with a much older notion which considers humor as a tendency or personality construct, broadly referred to as a sense of humor. Freud (1928) was the first to call joking and wittiness one of the highest defense mechanisms. His basic idea was that humor acts as a means to make fun of sexual and aggressive impulses from the Id. To him a sense of humor was also a mature defense mechanism, because the forbidden impulses could still be recognized in humorous expressions, as in jokes on Jews and Belgians. Nowadays, we would refer to these dynamics as humorous coping (see Doosje, 2010 for a study of this concept), or humorous emotion regulation (see Gross, 2001 for a description of antecedent-focused and response-focused forms of emotion regulation). The aim of these internal dynamics is to relieve stress and to increase positive emotion.

In a receptive sense, humorous material may be understood (humor comprehension), and appreciated (humor appreciation). Also, mirth and laughter may be the result of humor processes (Martin, 2007). Individuals differ with regard to the strength of these passive tendencies, as demonstrated by Thorson & Powell (1993). In an active sense, humor is being produced (humor production), even in response to stress (humorous coping). Although there is little research on these individual tendencies in organizations, it may be expected that employees high in active sense of humor tendencies seek employees high in passive sense of humor tendencies: clowns and stand-up comedians need an audience, too. Research investigating the so-called company fool has shown that these usually self-employed functionaries do not only improve the organizational climate, but also show inefficiencies and incongruities in the organization which need attention (Plester & Orams, 2008).

Quite another and more recent approach consists of the conceptualization of so-called humor styles (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003). There are four humor styles which vary along two dimensions: social versus self and positive versus negative. The four humor styles are depicted in Figure 2.

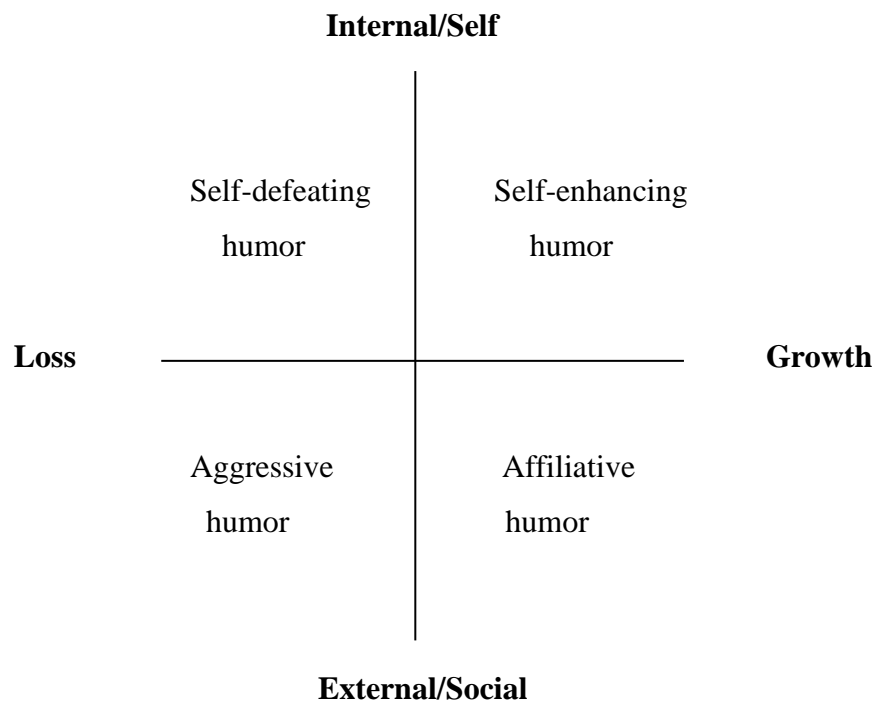


Figure 2: The four humor styles (based upon Martin et al., 2003)

There are two humor styles which focus on the self: the self-enhancing humor style and the self-defeating humor style. The first is aimed at the use of humor to make oneself feel better; the second is aimed at feeling oneself worse. The two other humor styles are social in nature. The affiliative humor style is aimed at using humor to improve social functioning and cohesion and to have a good time, whereas the aggressive humor style is aimed at using humor to make others feel themselves worse.

A number of studies has shown negative relations between affiliative humor and depression as well as negative affect (Hugelshofer, Kwon, Reff, & Olson, 2006; Kuiper et al., 2004), and a number of studies have found positive correlations between self-enhancing humor and the personal accomplishment dimension of burnout (Talbot, 2000; Talbot & Lumden, 2000). Previous research has also presented positive relationships of the aggressive and self-defeating humor styles with neuroticism (Martin et al., 2003) as well as negative relationships with agreeableness and conscientiousness (Martin et al., 2003). Aggressive humor styles correlate negatively with emotional perception, emotional support, and conflict management (Yip & Martin, 2006), positively with depression, anxiety, and negative affect (Kuiper et al., 2004), and with burnout dimensions (Tüm kaya, 2007). More recently, Kuiper and McHale (2009) found that greater endorsement of positive self-evaluative standards



led to the use of more affiliative humor, which, in turn, led to higher levels of social self-esteem and lower levels of depression. Also, as predicted, greater endorsement of negative self-evaluative standards led to the use of more self-defeating humor, which resulted in lower levels of social self-esteem and higher levels of depression. These results suggest that specific features associated with these two humor styles may contribute in a differential manner to an individual's level of well-being. In particular, the increased use of affiliative humor may facilitate the development and maintenance of social support networks that foster and enhance well-being. Alternatively, the greater use of self-defeating humor may result in the development of maladaptive social support networks that impede psychological well-being.

When combined, these empirical studies form considerable evidence that positive humor styles increase well-being, whereas negative humor styles increase ill-being (e.g., Martin et al., 2003). However, humor styles have been rarely applied in occupational health psychology research. Moreover, the social-individual dimension may prove interesting to apply to occupational settings, because they may provide indicators for the quality of interaction in work groups and the organization as a whole instead of merely individual effects of different humor styles or traits.

#### **4. Work group and organizational humor use and outcomes (meso level)**

Although individuals express their sense of humor, humorous expressions are usually ventilated in social settings. Although humor consultants usually stress the poor state of humorosity in organizations, the opposite seems true. In a descriptive study, Holmes and Marra (2002a) assessed the number of humorous remarks and laughter in team meetings in several types of organizations. They concluded that these occurred every two to five minutes. They also found that this frequency was somewhat higher in meetings of blue-collar and white-collar workers in private companies than in non-profit and government organizations. Additional research by these authors also showed a lower frequency of humor in team meetings than in meetings of close friends (Holmes & Marra, 2002b). Social cohesion may result from similarities in humor appreciation between individuals in organizations. Years of research on similarity-attraction theory has demonstrated that people are attracted to others who share similar attitudes, beliefs or humor (e.g., Byrne, 1971).

The functions of humorous exchange in work teams and companies in general may vary greatly: reinforcing humor increases solidarity and affirms power

relationships, whereas subversive humor defies power relationships (Holmes & Marra, 2002b). Subversive humor accounts for almost 40 percent of humorous exchange in organizational meetings, which is about ten times more than in close friendship settings. This seems to indicate that there is greater tension and rivalry in work settings than in friendship settings. Humor has also been shown to be used to by factory workers to either communicate or impose social norms, or to comment on the organization of the company (Collinson, 1988). All this is the subject of superiority theory (Hobbes, 1840; Radcliffe-Brown, 1952), which argues that humor may be used for the creation of social distance or for the improvement of one's self-image. In this chapter, we will follow Duncan, Smeltzer, and Leap (1990) in consecutively discussing the role of humor in work groups/teams, leadership, and communication & organizational culture.

#### *4.1 Humor within work groups or teams (lateral effects)*

In order to map humor in groups, Lundberg (1969) identified four analytical categories of individuals involved in joking behavior: 1) the *initiator*, or the one telling the joke, 2) the *target*, or the one *to* whom the joke is directed, 3) the *focus*, or the “butt” of the joke, or the one *at* whom the humor is directed, and 4) the *public*, or the individual/group observing the joke.

Cooper (2008) recently identified four theoretical mechanisms through which humor may affect inter-personal interactions: Affect-reinforcement, perceived similarity, self-disclosure, and hierarchical salience. Here, we will only discuss the first three pathways, because the final one pertains to hierarchical relationships and will therefore be presented in the next paragraph (4.2). First, the reinforcement-affect model of attraction by Clore and Byrne (1974) describes how social communications can be either reinforcing (by eliciting positive affect) or punishing (by eliciting negative affect). According to Cooper (2008), humor may act as a reinforcing or punishing event. Second, research on similarity-attraction theory has demonstrated that people are attracted to others who share similar attitudes and beliefs (Byrne, 1971). Sharing a humorous experience allows an individual to validate that he or she is interpreting a ‘humorous’ stimulus correctly (i.e. as being funny), and will, in turn, make the parties involved in the experience feel closer. Third, self-disclosure is a critical aspect of relationship-building and, in general, higher levels of self-disclosure

lead to increased liking for the discloser (Collins & Miller, 1994). From this, it follows that expressing humor at work may be a form of self-disclosure.

A more integrative theoretical model reflecting the effects of humor on group *cohesiveness* is developed by Romero and Cruthirds (2006). Factors enhancing group cohesiveness may be categorized as external (e.g., threats and competition from other groups) or internal (e.g., new member initiation) (Sherif 1977). Group cohesiveness can be enhanced through positive reinforcement within a group and the reduction of external threats. Humor creates positive feelings among group members by reducing external threats and thereby bonding group members (Francis 1994). Aggressive humor could, for example, be used to ridicule a team's competitors. Internal forces, such as socialization processes, can take the form of affiliative or mild aggressive humor to introduce new employees to the team's or company's culture and make them conform to group norms (e.g., Martineau 1972). In existing groups affiliative and self-enhancing humor may increase group cohesiveness by associating positive emotions generated by humor with group membership (e.g., Terrion & Ashford 2002). In sum, Romero and Cruthirds (2006) propose that using both affiliative and self-enhancing humor promotes group cohesion.

#### *4.2 Humor within hierarchical relationships (vertical effects)*

The relationships between leaders and subordinates are another interesting area where superiority theory is at work. In a review by Martin (2007) it is shown that humor may be an important communication skill for leaders, who may use it to resolve conflicts, motivate their staff and promote cohesion and cooperation within a work group. Also, humor use by the leader helps to lubricate the relationship with subordinates, relieving tension and promoting creativity and motivation (Decker & Rotondo, 2001). Employees who see a high sense of humor in their leaders also report a more positive view on the leadership qualities of their boss as well as a greater satisfaction with their own job (Decker, 1987). Cooper (2008) states that humor can also be effective for breaking down the interpersonal barriers associated with formal hierarchy or status (Locke, 1996; Vinton, 1989). This is consistent with research showing that a sense of humor is a desirable trait, although the desirable type of sense of humor differs for males and females (Yip & Martin, 2006). In the leadership literature, too, we see a difference between positive and negative humor: good leaders have a benign humorous style, whereas bad leaders have a more mean-spirited humorous style

(Priest & Swain, 2002). Also, managers with more positive humor showed higher managerial competence than managers with more negative humor. However, there was a difference between male and female managers. For female managers, using positive humor showed a stronger relationship with their competence than for male managers. Also, the use of more negative humor was more negatively related to female managers' competence than for male managers. These findings are consistent with the conceptual frame of humor styles (Martin et al., 2003) described in an earlier section, including both social and individual humor styles as well as positive and negative humor styles.

From a theoretical point-of-view, *hierarchical salience* is relevant for humor shared vertically. According to this inter-personal mechanism put forward by Cooper (2008), humor can be used to either enforce or remove hierarchical barriers separating managers from employees. For example, managers often use humor to control the behavior of their employees (Holmes, 2000; Martineau, 1972). People who occupy high-status roles joke at a higher rate than those of lesser status and tend to be more successful at eliciting laughter from others (Robinson & Smith-Lovin 2001). And when high-status individuals use humor, they are likely to choose someone of lower status as the focus or "butt" of the joke (Cosser 1959). Viewed from this perspective, humor is a privilege of the authorities, used to demonstrate their (formal) power over others (Holmes & Marra 2002). Naturally, the type of humor used most frequently in these instances is aggressive humor.

However, employees or managers may also employ humor to reduce their hierarchical distance. Kets de Vries (1990) describes that certain employees who are particularly prone to using humor may adopt the role of the 'sagefool' and take on the responsibility of relaying dissenting opinions and feedback to senior management, since this type of feedback is generally more accepted when communicated in a humorous way. Romero and Cruthirds (2006) propose that self-enhancing humor may be used by employees to convey similarity or ingratiate the superior. As Cooper (2005) suggests, humor may be a powerful ingratiation strategy through which one's attractiveness in the eyes of the other may be increased and the other's behavior may be influenced. In the presence of superiors, self-defeating humor may not be the best strategy to use for employees, because this type of humor may deprecate the credibility of the humor or joke initiator (Romero and Cruthirds, 2007). From a manager's perspective, employing either affiliative or self-defeating humor may be

useful in reducing barriers between the manager and his/her subordinates. Research shows that followers rate their leaders as less stressful, more supportive of participation, and more open to communication when they utilize slight self-defeating humor (Smith & Powell, 1988).

#### *4.3 Humor as communication vehicle and reflection of organizational culture*

Communication is inherent to humor, as displayed in our definition of humor as non-serious incongruity *shared* in work settings aimed at the intentional amusement of individuals, groups or organizations. Humor in communication creates an open atmosphere by arousing positive emotions that enhance listening, understanding, and acceptance of messages (Greatbatch & Clark 2002). The advertising literature, indeed suggests that humor has an “attention-getting” quality (Sternthal & Craig, 1973) and leads to improved comprehension, persuasion and emotional connection (Weinberger & Gulas 1992). The audience will probably identify best with individuals who employ self-enhancing, moderate self-defeating or affiliative humor, thereby enhancing communication.

Moreover, sharing humor may facilitate honest and free communication, even when conveying a critical message. Humor may also reflect underlying dynamics and tensions in organization, as was concluded in a sociological review by Dwyer (1991). Like Holmes & Marra (2002b), Dwyer distinguishes between humor used in a subversive or in a reinforcing way. Workers often use humor to joke about the incompetence of managers or poor working conditions, whereas managers use humor to disguise the commanding nature of their decisions or to divide and rule (Martin, 2007). The type of organization does seem to matter for the use of positive and negative forms of humor. Government and *not for profit* organizations showed less competitive and more supportive forms of humor compared to commercial organizations (Holmes & Marra, 2002a). It is suggested by Martin (2007) that the analysis of humor in an organization may be a useful way to evaluate its overall corporate culture, because humor has been described as an important component of organizational culture (e.g., Clouse & Spurgeon, 1995). To be more precise, humor may be a tool for organizational diagnosis and change (Kahn, 1989). In his overview of research on humor at work, Martin (2007) concludes that the effective use of humor may also be an important skill in negotiation and mediation. This shows the

close connection between humor and conflict, which has not yet been investigated thoroughly.

In sum, following Romero and Cruthirds (2006), humor is an element that managers should try and integrate into their company culture (Newstrom, 2002), because it forms a valuable tool for communicating organizational values ('what we find important') and behavioral norms ('how things are done around here'). This may, for example, be done through sharing humorous stories portraying (im)proper behavior by (former) company members. Moreover, humor is the perfect vehicle for transferring these values and norms because it does not (necessarily) offend the audience listening to the jokes or stories. Therefore, we may assume that both affiliative and (mild) aggressive humor is being used by managers and employees to convey and reinforce their company's culture. The organizational humor model of Romero and Cruthirds (2006) summing up the selection and evaluation of humor in an organizational context is depicted in Figure 3.

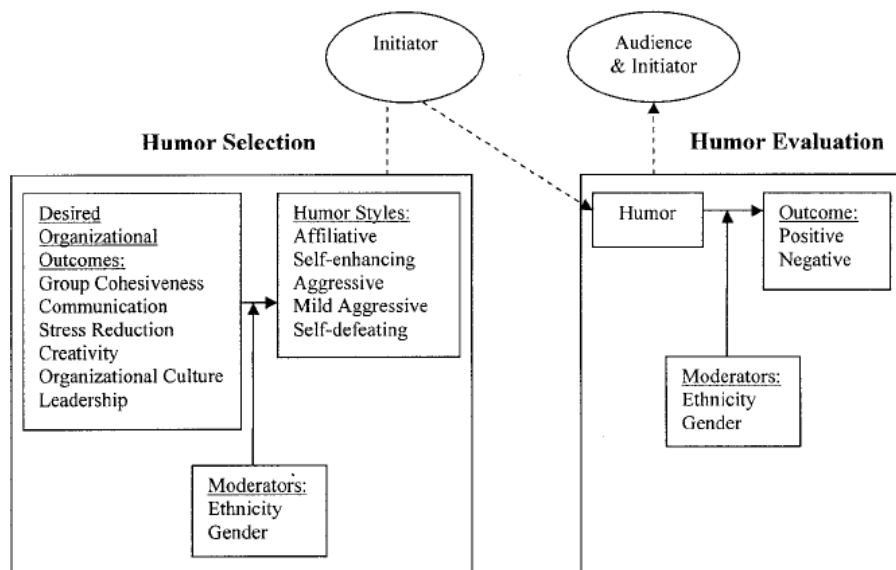


Figure 3: The organizational humor model of Romero and Cruthirds (2006)

## 5. Humor use in the broader arena (macro level)

Of course, humor is not just used by individuals in work teams or companies, but also in the broader (socio-cultural) arena. Two important factors affecting the use and evaluation of humor at this macro-level are ethnicity and gender.

Research indicates that different cultural or *ethnic* groups both select different types of humor and evaluate the use of humor in diverging ways (e.g., Alden & Hoyer, 1993). Ethnic humor, especially in the organizational setting, has the potential to create negative affect and conflict (Clouse & Spurgeon, 1995). As was the case at the organizational group level (4.2), humor may also be used by larger groups of people or societies to enforce (hierarchical) differences. Social Dominance Theory (Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) proposes that human societies almost universally adopt hierarchical power structures. These power differences have become entrenched and differentiate subgroups of people. Aggressive humor is a tool to portray or strengthen these differences. One important message for companies is to first consider the audience's ethnic composition before selecting humor content and style, and ethnic humor should be avoided altogether in the workplace. If, for example, a manager is addressing a group of workers from a high power distance society, one should avoid self-defeating humor because in these societies individuals with power tend to have feelings of high self-worth and strive to maintain or even increase power distance (Hofstede, 1984).

With regard to *gender*, research indicates that women use affiliative humor frequently to build solidarity whereas men use self-enhancing or aggressive humor to impress and emphasize similarities (e.g., Hay, 2000). As with ethnic jokes, sexist humor should be avoided in company settings because recipients of such humor may not enjoy it and even experience negative affect (Hemmasi et al., 1994). According to some empirical studies, women find sexist jokes more offensive than men (Smelzer & Leap, 1988) and men prefer sexual humor more than women (Brodzinsky et al., 1981).

## **6. Assessment and intervention**

If humor at work is to be studied successfully and thoroughly, we are in need of reliable and valid assessment of a sense of humor in employees, managers, and their organizations. The most recent overview of humor assessment dates from the end of the nineties (Ruch, 1998). Few of these instruments have been concerned with the assessment of humor at work, with the exception of a peer-report Company-wide Peer Rating Questionnaire (Bizi, Keinan, & Beit-Hallami, 1988, in Ruch, 1998). Also, there is a questionnaire of occupational humorous coping, described in Doosje et al. (2010). On an organizational level there is an instrument developed by Kahn (1989),

which offers a humor diagnosis of organizations. The Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ) described in paragraph 3 has strong construct and predictive validity in measuring four humor styles with possible benign or detrimental effects on work processes and individual well-being, two individual and two social styles with good reliability and validity (Martin et al., 2003).

The majority of current intervention programs focus on the treatment of employees who are facing stress (secondary prevention), or who have fallen ill due to stress (tertiary prevention; Kompier & Kristensen, 2000). There is a lack of programs targeting healthy employees in order to prevent the development of mental health problems (primary prevention), although *how-to* books abound. Usually, these works mainly focus on the individual in the organization (Blumenfeld & Alpern, 1994; McGhee, 1999; Morreall, 1997; Weinstein, 1997) and they try to improve the sense of humor of the individual. There is also material on humor training (Tamblyn & Weiss, 2000). A main direction in therapy and coaching is provocative therapy, which uses humorous techniques to help people with their problems (Farrelly & Lynch, 1987 - Hollander & Wijnberg, 2002).

To create a 'fun' company culture, humor measures may even be administered during the selection process to identify people who match the humor style preference of a team or the organization. Again, the HSQ (Martin et al., 2003) may be useful in this respect. Moreover, to sustain the organizational culture, humor does not only have to be conveyed by funny employees. Organizational humor can take many forms, such as forwarding funny cartoons to each other which may use as a way to reduce stress levels or break the ice at meetings.

Unfortunately, intervention-based research is lacking (e.g., Kompier, Geurts, Grundemann, Vink & Smulders, 1998). The scarce available experimental research indicates positive effects of humor interventions. For example, a study by Zweyer, Velker and Ruch (2004) has shown that watching a funny affiliative type of video leads to an increase in pain tolerance. Furthermore, research by Szabo (2003) has also found a positive effect of humor on reported psychological fear. A study by Cann and colleagues (2000) has shown that humor may function both as a preventative and as a cure against the development or experience of stress. However, the precise (psycho-physiological and/or cognitive) mechanisms through which humor may prevent or reduce stress and increase mental resilience are yet to be revealed.



## **7. Conclusion and discussion**

This review has presented a wide variety of theories and empirical evidence trying to describe, explain and predict the use of humor in employees, managers and organizations. The main points will now be summarized and discussed. All this will result in a future research agenda, which may be used to forward our knowledge of humor at work.

### *7.1 Conclusion*

This review started to clarify the professional and academic interest for humor in organizations. Despite the fact that humor may not be crucial to productive aims of the organization, it does seem important because of its relationship to positive psychology and the increasing scientific and professional attention for what makes organizations positive and successful. Humor is definitely considered a character strength which transcends employees above everyday reality and a way to cope successfully with stressful circumstances. Humor within individuals and organizations may be an important asset, contributing to organizational performance and even competitiveness. An explanation for this phenomenon is offered by the Broaden-and-Build theory (Fredrickson et al., 2008), which predicts that people's mind sets are broadened by positive emotions resulting from positive experiences like meditation and, possibly, humor.

This all suggests that humor at work is potentially beneficial for employees and organizations alike. The next step, however, is to define humor in organizations. For this, we developed a working definition of organizational humor as 'non-serious incongruity shared in work settings, aimed at the intentional amusement of individuals, groups or organizations'. This definition enabled us to clarify several levels of humor in the organization (micro, meso, and macro), which corresponds with an overall Egg model containing these levels and their interactions.

The individual is at the micro level, sourcing humorous traits and humorous behaviors. After the notion of humor as an emotion regulation mechanism humor was developed further into four humor styles, both individual and social, positive or negative (Martin et al. 2003). These humor styles are embedded into personality psychology and they are also predictive of burnout, well-being, depression and self-esteem, with different relationships for different humor styles.

At the work group and organization level it has become clear that humor is not uncommon in organizations, although there are more instances of humor in friendship groups than in organizational groups. Our review has also shown that humor is being used to decrease social distance, but also to increase it. This is not only done laterally (within groups), but also vertically (within the manager-employee relationship). Also, there seems to be a difference in humor use in commercial organizations on the one hand and non-profit and not-for-profit organizations on the other. Finally, humorous expressions may also be a tool for organizational diagnosis and change, as put forward so eloquently by Kahn (1989). A clear model incorporating many elements of individual and organizational humor has been put forward by Romero and Cruthirds (2006).

### *7.2 Discussion and future research agenda*

Although previous studies have given us some insight into the (dis)advantages of humor use in an organizational context, the research field of occupational humor is still in its 'nascent' phase (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). Therefore, there is a need for comprehensive theoretical frameworks to guide future empirical studies. The framework proposed by Romero and Cruthirds (2006) may be helpful in guiding studies into the selection and evaluation of humor in work groups. However, the dynamical nature of humor and the effects of humor shared across different organizational levels are not explicitly presented in this model. Therefore, we would advise researchers who are interested in these aspects of humor to also look into our Egg model of organizational humor. Not only does this model enable clear distinctions between the levels research may be conducted, it also shows that interactions between the levels are possible. These interactions have so far not been the subject of our research endeavors. Future research should focus on these interactions, including both quantitative (e.g. Martin et al., 2003) and qualitative research methods (e.g. Holmes & Marra, 2002).

Second, once the 'point of departure' is clear, valid and reliable measurement instruments are needed to examine associations of humor use with individual, team-level or organizational outcomes. Next to the already mentioned HSQ (Martin et al., 2003) to gauge employees' trait-like humor styles, measures of actual humor behavior (See Doosje, 2010 for an example of an instrument assessing humorous behaviors), and organizational humor (e.g., Kahn, 1989) are needed. Third, the external validity of

these measurement instruments and of the associations found between humor styles, humor behavior and outcomes should be tested in a wide variety of work settings. Only then can we examine the robustness of individual, team-related and organizational-level (dis)advantages of humor use across professions, industries, and cultures. Finally, there is the matter of humor as an intervention. Although we know that humor is being used by employees and managers to change each others' behaviors, we are still far from systematic interventions and a comparison of these interventions with control conditions. At the individual level, we do know something about the power of humor to heal the individual, for example in provocative therapy (Farrelly, & Lynch, 1987). At the organizational level, little is known yet. How should humor interventions be designed and tested? These and other kinds of questions could lead us to discover and use the magic of humor as a human resource tool in organizations.

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