

FEATURES OF HUMOROUS TEXTS ESTIMATION AS A PARAMETER OF PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING OF PROFESSIONALS

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Abstract. *This study deals with a search for indicators of psychological well-being of doctors on the basis of their understanding and estimation of humorous texts. 46 people took part in the research. The obtained results permit to confirm that understanding and estimation of humorous texts are connected with a common feeling of personal and professional well-being.*

Key words: *psychological well-being, humor, a doctor, humor understanding and estimation, texts' classification.*

Introduction

One of the most serious and actual problems which refer to the study and securing of psychological well-being of professionals is necessity of adequate methodological development of estimation means. The complication of a theoretical construct "psychological well-being" involves multidimensionality and multilevel parameter of its components.

The study of "psychological well-being", that includes emotional, cognitive and behavior aspects, has started with the book of Norman Bradburn in 1969. Several approaches appeared in the study, which reflect the interest of researchers to its various features and components [Bradburn, 1969]. *The first one* involves identification of psychological well-being with subjective feeling of happiness and common life satisfaction [Seligman, 2006; Diener, 1984 and others]. *The second approach* reflects the interest to a procedural aspect of well-being experience, connected chiefly with self-fulfillment opportunities, realization of eudemonistic directions and personal development [Kronik A.A., 1994; Waterman, 1999 and others]. *The third approach* of the well-being study, that originates in works of humanistic psychologists, stresses personal characteristics of the subject, which provide its "full functioning" [Maslow, 1993; Rogers, 1995 and others]. Thus psychological well-being is not just a lack of mental or neurotic disorders, it is a capability to control emotional life, stressing mainly positive emotions experience, an opportunity to establish and support confidential and long-term relations with significant people and, finally, an ability to control stress and hard life situations. It is an opinion of many researchers, that one of the indirect criterion of psychological well-being is an attitude to humor – a

unique cultural phenomenon, that unites cognitive and affective processes and exists "in a varying form in a life of an every man, country, nation, independently of political climate and life conditions" [Blinnikova and Andrianova, 2009, p. 43; Martin, 2007]. M. Seligman who is a father of positive psychology deems a good sense of humor to be one of 24 characteristics associated with well-being.

Humor research is a multidisciplinary field due to the variety of comic phenomena and their influence on human life. It is not a coincidence that K. Petrova makes as an epigraph to her study of a non-verbal component of anecdotes words by D. Crystal: «Nothing is more likely to kill a good joke than a linguistic analysis» [Petrova, 2001, 335]. The problem of humor study, that answers a question "Why it is funny?", needs to be considered through such variables as location, time, characteristics of participants of the situation. Most of us laugh at funny things a thousand times a day and sometimes we feel negative effects of humor.

Humor research has revealed many different approaches of humor, but currently we can speak about three main theories explaining the nature of humor: Superiority Theory of humor, Relief theory, Incongruity-Resolution theory. Superiority Theory of Humor contains a three-part thesis: every humorous situation has a winner and a loser; incongruity is always present in a humorous situation; humor requires an element of surprise [Gruner, 1997]. The Relief theory does not really give an explanation why we find humor funny and can in fact be seen a theory of laughter [Freud, 1997]. The Incongruity-Resolution theory cannot explain why we can hear a joke more than one time and still find it funny and why not all incongruities are funny. However, many researchers depart from the "comprehensive" theories, putting forward their hypotheses and developing their own models [Martin et al., 2003]. For example, Leventhal and his colleagues described an information model of humor understanding, which includes processes of perception, interpretation, integration and final judgment. The authors suggest that each stage presents specific procedures, and that any of them can manifest in gender differences [Leventhal and Safer, 1977]. V. Ruch with his colleagues created a humor test 3WD ("3 Witz-Dimensionen"). This test helps to assess, whether jokes or cartoons of the following three categories are funny or annoying; these categories are of incongruity-resolutions humor, nonsense humor, and sexual humor [Ruch, 1998]. M. Minsky supports the hypothesis that a common element for all kinds of humor can be considered an unexpected, often deliberate change of frames, which are one of the ways of stereotypical situations representation [Minsky, 1977].

The reference to understanding and estimation of a humorous parameter on a background of lack of a common psychological conception of a comic parameter provides our study with a research character.

The purpose of the study is to find the indicators of psychological well-being of physicians as representatives of socio-economic professions basing on subjective estimation of humorous texts.

The Research Program

The study is composed of two stages. The preliminary stage involves the development of methodological instrument that included the idea of a meaning and quality classification of humorous material. This classification includes subjective estimation of short humorous texts according to established criteria. For instance, the research of I. Blinnikova and E. Andrianova showed, that cognitive complexity, wit, and novelty of an anecdote are the most important parameters of estimation, further follows the context of jokes, among which political ones, vital and childish jokes are significant, and indecent ones are intermediate [Blinnikova and Andrianova, 2009].

The genre of an anecdote requires particular attention – it is one of the most popular and favorite ones. It is an opinion of many Russian culture researchers (historians, philologists, sociologists) that the genre of an anecdote, as a short humorous story, developed rapidly during the Soviet period of a strict control of private life and rigid censorship. One could express his critical attitude to the process and save his dignity under the ideological pressure only in an “allegorical” way. An anecdote is a story about a horrible or unlawful situation that thanks to its witty, artistic or ironical comment provokes laughter (“laughter through tears” by N. Gogol¹). O. Lebed (1999), comparing collections of modern jokes and jokes of ten years’ prescription, came to the conclusion, that an anecdote is not just a joke, it is means of reaction to a problem, it is also an indicator of main topics which disturb the society [Lebed, 1999].

The review of anecdotes, devoted to medical labour, in mass media and Internet resources showed that their topics reflect everything that does not suffice doctors, their patients, medical labour features, personal and professional relations. 80 jokes were selected, which satisfied the demands of “brevity”, contained words of medical topics, they were proposed to five experts for the purpose of shortening the list and choosing the funniest, devoted to a medical sphere anecdotes. Frequency analysis of experts’ estimates allowed choosing 30 texts, which represent “anecdotes about doctors” due to the following reason: we proceeded from the generally accepted point that the highest form of a sense of humor demonstration is ability to laugh at oneself [Martin, 2007].

The sample involved 41 doctors of various specializations of Moscow health centres, 11 men and 30 women at the age from 28 to 64 and with job seniority of 3-36 years. The questioning was held at their workplace during work time and this set a limitation on a choice of a method for filling the blank. The respondents were offered to estimate the jokes and to range them into 9 categories (“likeable”, “funny”, “witty”, “original”, “offensive”, “mean”, “silly”, “right”, “vital”). The categories, in their turn, could be

¹ Gogol N.V. (1809 - 1852)– the famous Russian writer.

combined into four groups, which reflect various aspects of their estimation – 1) humor level, 2) cognitive complexity, 3) emotional disapproval, negation, 4) rational attitude (Table 1).

Table 1. Classification table of humor text estimation

Semantic groups	1) humor level	2) cognitive complexity	3) emotional disapproval, negation	4) rational attitude
Categories	"likeable", "funny"	"witty", "original"	"offensive", "cruel", "silly"	"right", "vital"

To sum up the analyzed data on the study of diagnostic opportunities of comic texts, **following suppositions were suggested:**

1. It is known, that ability to understand and to produce humor "switches-off", when a person experiences a stressful situation, but later, after a period of time, when the situation is over, it is narrated as a funny episode. That's why doctors, who go through a difficult period, that includes patients' aggression, conflicts within a working group, financial problems, complicated family situation, are "insensitive" to humor, and this is expressed in a negative attitude to the offered jokes.
2. Psychoanalytic conception of humor understanding – the relief theory - allows to assume, that work with simulative material affects situational anxiety indicators.
3. A. Sergeeva warns, that the Russians, who enjoy laughing at their weak points and themselves, quite often in the presence of foreigners, in view of the feeling of responsibility for everything, that happens, do not allow to be laughed at by others. By analogy, it is possible to presume that professionals, who use humor in their environment, disapprove jokes, which are narrated about them by other specialists, for instance, which are offered by an experimenter [Sergeeva, 2005].

The procedure of launching the main stage of the experiment is the following (Figure 1). At the beginning the responders were asked to tell some biographical questionnaire data. Then "State-Trait Anxiety Inventory"(PA) was offered to mark out among the responders persons with steady individual characteristic, that reflects one's predisposition to anxiety and that defines an increased neuropsychiatric reaction (tensity) on a wide range of situations, which were estimated as threatening. Before and after the work with the jokes the respondents filled in "An inventory of situational anxiety" by Ch. Spilberger in adaptation by U. Haning (SA1 и SA2), that diagnoses an emotional reaction on a current situation, which appears in a form of tensity , anxiety, nervousness, for fixation of possible

respondents' state changings [Leonova and Kapitsa, 2003]. The value of a personal and situational anxiety index can vary in the range of 20 to 80 points where 30 points is diagnosed as a low level, above 45 as a high level.

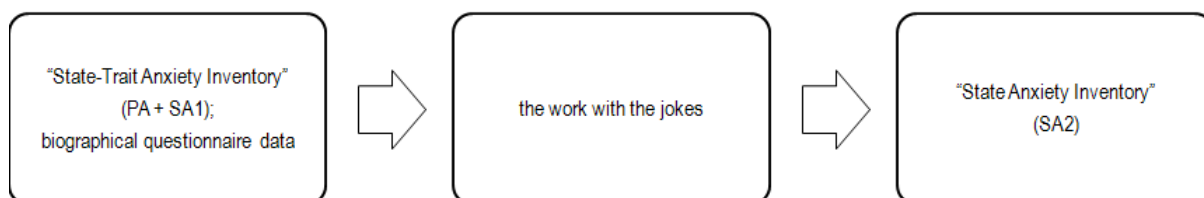


Figure 1. Research design

Statistical data processing was held with the help of standard software package SPSS for Windows 11.0.

The Results and Discussion

With the help of cluster analysis (Quick Cluster Analysis), two sub-groups of respondents, who differ in a degree of situational anxiety intensity during the first and the second measurements, were marked out (Table 2).

Table 2. Two groups of participants with different anxiety indexes

Group 1 (N=33)	Group 2 (N=8)	Level of statistically significant distinctions between the two groups $p \leq 0,05$ (Mann-Whitney U-criteria)
Low and middle level of personal anxiety (PA)	High level of personal anxiety (PA (SA1 and SA2))	
Low and middle level of situational anxiety (SA1)	High level of situational anxiety (SA1)	
Low and middle level of situational anxiety (SA2)	High level of situational anxiety (SA2)	

The first sub-group (33 people) is defined by moderate situational and personal anxious intensity; the second one includes 8 people with high level of indicators. These data reflect the tendency to generalization and accumulation of doctors' negative stress consequences. It is interesting, that shifts of

measurements of situational anxiety (SA1 and SA2) decrease ($p \leq 0,05$) after the work with the jokes only within the first sub-group, and that partly confirms the suggested suppositions. States of increased mental tensivity do not promote an adequate estimation of the texts' humor.

The data analysis of the whole sample showed, that the respondents with high anxiety level during the first measurement (before the work with the jokes) liked less jokes ($p \leq 0,041$). It is interesting that high situational anxiety during the second measurement (after the work with the jokes) is connected with more jokes, which were considered to be within the "right" category ($p \leq 0,008$). It is possible, that this fact is connected with actualization of various problems, typical for a modern doctor – busy work time, dealing with capricious suffering contingent, poor salary for such an important and responsible work.

10 jokes of 30 were considered to be "mean, offensive and silly"; it's possible that this fact reflects inadmissibility of laughter at doctors by others in their presence. At the same time physicians marked original jokes as witty and likeable ($p \leq 0,02$), offensive ones were not considered to be witty ($p \leq 0,001$), and silly ones to be original ($p \leq 0,015$), all this confirms our generalized forms of humorous texts estimation (Figure 2).

6 people, who estimated the jokes, which were likeable to the most part of respondents, as silly ones, experienced serious family problems; this was pointed in the preliminary questionnaire. Thus "sensitiveness" to a comic parameter, attitude to humor involves emotional filing of the enduring life period and one's subjective experience.

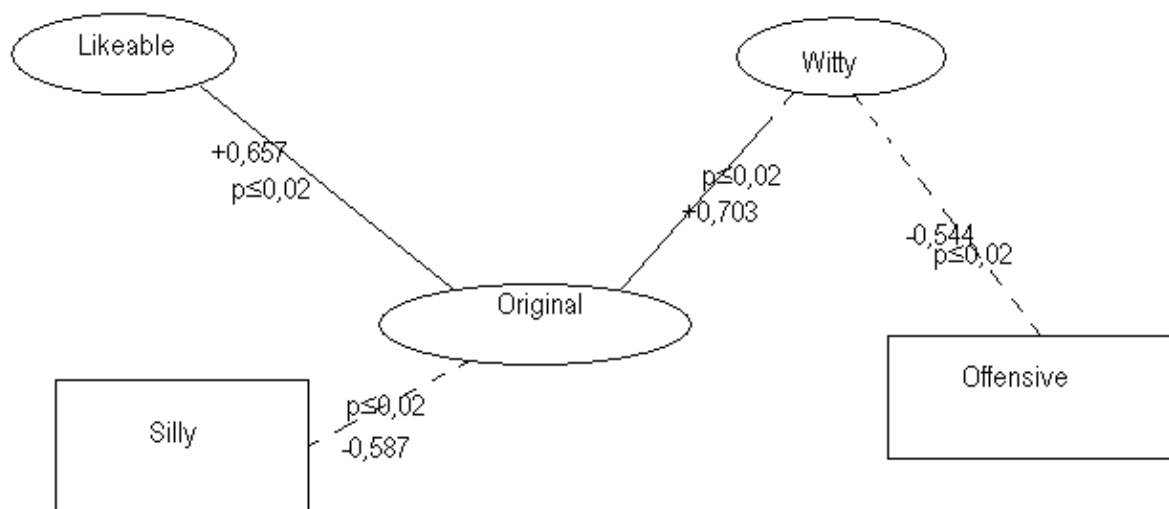


Figure 2. Correlation pleads of humor estimation categories (Spearman's criteria, N=41)

Conclusions

The obtained results allow asserting that the attitude of physicians with low parameters of psychological well-being, was manifested in high anxiety, which is not reduced after working with humorous texts. In general the proposed texts significantly were described as "unfunny" more frequently. We would like to note negative statistics obtained in the group of physicians who participated in the study, 80% of the sample shows a high and close to that level of anxiety, indicating a serious depletion of emotional and physical resources of the respondents associated with work load. These results require close attention from psychologists. The results acquired within a small, but successful group of doctors considering a display of anxiety show the capabilities of humor as a means of coping with negative states. The indicators of situational anxiety after working with the jokes decreased. If these results manifest on a large sample, then we will speak about effective humorous therapy that can be provided in workplaces. Although the issue of a second usage of the list of professional anecdotes, as well as the issue of influence of their novelty or publicity to respondents remains open.

All in all, the obtained results permit to confirm, that understanding and estimation of humorous texts are connected with a common feeling of personal and professional well-being.

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