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Claremont McKenna College
The Effects of Humor when Coping with Stress

submitted to
Professor Craig Bowman

by
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Abstract

Although humor is often used in professional, social, and political settings, its empirical importance is usually laughed at. I argue that scholars should give more attention to the topic. Building on prior research, the present work will explore the relationship between stress relief and the use of humor. Specifically, it will reveal the usage of humor to cope among historically stressed groups of people. Lastly, as stress and marginalization are linked, the study will also look at the relationship between a racially marginalized group, Black people, and their use of humor to relieve stress or cope.

Keywords: humor, coping, stress, marginalization

Humor is a universally pleasant experience that is recognized by many cultures of the world. Likewise, laughter is seen as the pairing response. While different situations might elicit humor, its usefulness to those involved can vary. Humor is commonly seen as being important to humans socially. In the context of health care providers and educators, when used effectively, humor has been documented to build relationships and enhance student's performance (Savage et al., 2017). However, though humor has been emphasized by many theorists, it was not until Norman Cousins published his theories on its connection to the anatomy of the human body that attention started to increase. He explained that he had been able to recover from a serious disease through humor and laughter (Ibid). Following those claims, much attention was then given in the popular media to the importance of humor for physical and psychological health. While Cousins's assertions were never validated, Martin and Lefcourt (1986) was the first empirical study of humor to be taken seriously by the scientific field. They reported three separate trials indicating that humor moderates the impact of stressful life events on mood (Porterfield, 2004). A mixture of self-report humor scales and behavioral assessments provided sufficient evidence to suggest that humor does have a significant effect on stress. Their empirical evidence supported the idea that humor buffers the impact of negative life events on psychological well-being. Ten years later, a larger team provided another study looking to expand on Martin and Lefcourt's data. They found that humor had similar effects as in the previous study and it was effective in mitigating stress (Martin et al., 1993). Additionally, they found there were links between coping behavior and humor. Participants using humor were found to have greater enjoyment of positive life experiences and a more positive orientation towards the self (Ibid). These studies are only

a few that show the many benefits of humor as a stress reliever. As previous studies have found a link between humor and physiological benefits; this paper will continue to build on those investigations. The present work will explore the relationship between the use of humor and stress relief. Furthermore, it will reveal how historically stressed groups of people use of humor to cope. Lastly, as stress and marginalization are linked, the study will also look at the relationship between a racially marginalized group, Black people, and their use of humor to relieve stress or cope.

Chapter 1: The Development of Humor and its use as a Stress Reliever

With the importance of humor established, we can focus on how past researchers have used experiments to determine the exact effects humor can have on a person. There are different reasons a person might respond to a situation with laughter, and different theories to explain it. One of those theories can be referred to as the Benign Violation theory. The idea states that laughter and amusement are the result of transgressions of a norm relevant to the present situation (McGraw & Warren, 2010). This violation is responded to with laughter due to the transgression not being threatening. This study by McGraw and Warren focused on moral violations but used the Benign Violation theory as a framework for the experiment. Their focus on moral issues was due to a strong documented association between moral violations and negative emotions, particularly disgust. Based on the theory, McGraw and Warren investigated three conditions that would make a violation benign and thus humorous. The first condition was the presence of an alternative norm suggesting that the situation was acceptable for participant. Second was the weak commitment or willingness to uphold the violated norm. The third was psychological distance the subject reported feeling from the violation. Experimenters conducted five separate trials addressing these conditions in different circumstances. The results from the five studies showed that benign moral violations tended to elicit laughter and amusement in addition to disgust. In the first study participants were more likely to report laughter in response to violation conditions than in response to the control versions (Ibid). In the second trial, funny violations that seemed “wrong” and “not wrong” were also met with more laughter in comparison to those who interpreted the behavior as strictly wrong or strictly not wrong (Ibid). The researcher’s investigation of the benign-

violation hypothesis in the domain of moral violations appears to explain humor across a range of domains (Ibid). McGraw and Warren suggested that humor is a positive and adaptive response to benign violations. Humor is also a viable place to highlight cultural misunderstandings as well. Additionally, seeing a violation as both wrong and not wrong influences perceptions of humor. Researchers in this example created an empirically backed framework from which some of our humor can be seen . This theory can not explain all humorous situations, but its influence on our humor is clear.

Other than looking at humor from a theoretical standpoint, scientists have also studied humor as a social skill. The ability to perceive social environments is something that has to be developed in humans. This development starts as early as infancy. Humor can be found early in a baby's life, occurring even before they can speak or sit up or move independently. In the next study, researchers were searching for the moment when babies leave the imitation stage and transition into having a more sophisticated understanding of the world around them. Mireault's team were looking to distinguish which month in a baby's development that they start responding to social cues with humor (Mireault et al., 2017). Psychologists presented three conditions of stimuli to the child. The first was an ordinary cue used as the control and should not really elicit a response. The other two added some aspect of absurdity to the cue. Results showed that since 4-month-olds can only show smiling and laughing, they are not seen as fully grasping the social aspect of the humor yet (Ibid). The findings suggested that infant laughter at 4 months is not completely distinguishable from imitation of the social context the child is in. This laughter is primarily related to the positive affect of the cue rather than the infant's ability to recognize the event as humorous. It was not until 5-months that the babies showed

significant responses to humorous cues (Ibid). An infant's early emergence of laughter and the strong immediate effect it has on their early social relationships should not be ignored. Researchers have shown additional empirical evidence on the exact timetable of that development. Experimenters suggested with more studies testing the development of humor, we can find more evidence on the effects this ability can have. Additionally, cues suggested that babies as young as 5 months are more capable of recognizing some simple incongruities between people than between objects (Ibid). As humor is primarily used in social situations, it would make sense that the infants were better at recognizing the humor in situations with human cues than with objects. While fear is usually the reaction from children presented with different or unfamiliar cues, researchers here have turned it into a positive experience. These differences can be thought of like expectation violations which can connect to the Benign Violations theory. The ability at an early age to recognize differences between people is primarily shown with laughter suggesting that the disgust response is learned later in life.

In response to findings on the development of a person's humor starting at such a young age, researchers also looked at some physiological benefits that serve as the foundation of humor. Newman and Stone's (1996) investigation focused on expanding upon previous research. Their experiments tried to improve the current literature by fixing some of the shortcomings of other experiments. They accomplished this by assessing the moderating effects of stress within an experimentally manipulated situation. Newman and Stone hypothesized that participants would use humor when they encountered a stressor. Specifically, they predicted that subject's humor production would moderate the effects of stress for subjects identified as having high or low levels of

humor (Newman & Stone, 1996). Conclusions about those levels were drawn from scores recorded on each of the 80 subject's Situational Humor Response Questionnaire (SHRQ). Based on how a participant scored, they were labeled with high or low trait humor. Subjects then were asked to fill out the Coping Humor Scale (CHS). As hypothesized, the results suggested that humor may be an effective coping strategy (Ibid). The scores revealed humor can even serve as a beneficial tool for those who do not typically use humor to cope with stress, which would be low trait humor participants. An expected difference was found as high-humor subjects appraised a film as less stressful, found more humor, and were more comfortable with the task than low-humor subjects (Ibid). Further, for all the variables in the trials, both high and low humor subjects produced lower reactivity during the stressful film than those with the serious narration. All in all, Newman and Stone's findings supported the role humor plays in moderating stress. Reviewing the heart rate and skin temperatures in addition to the past assessments, showed the effects on both physiological and mood measures. In addition, those participants in the serious condition recovered from the stressor more slowly than those in the funny condition (Ibid). This suggests that after a stressful encounter, it would be more beneficial to cope with something funny rather than something unamusing and serious. Though the rest of the paper will expand its focus on stressors within the real world, this source provided an empirical example of how humor can moderate the human body's response to stress.

The prior study was on the effects of a stressor on our production of humor, but stressors aren't the only thing that may affect it. While previous examples have shown subjects interacting with the humorous cue directly, situations found to be funny do not

always occur directed towards you or have to involve you at all. As a person interacts with the world, there are a multitude of social cues around them that might prompt that reaction. Researchers in another study investigated whether hearing laughter and amusement would elicit similar reactions. Fujiwara and Okamura (2018) focused on the aspect of laughing, which they believed would provide additional insight into humor's role in reducing stress. The two researchers hypothesized that hearing laughter would have a stress-reducing effect just as previous studies have found the production of humor to be (Fujiwara & Okamura, 2018). Their investigation into the stress-reducing effect of hearing laughter led them to examine autonomic nervous activity using an analysis of heart rate variability among participants. Those in the group with the laughter condition showed lower heart beats per minute than the rest of the groups across different time trials (Ibid). Fujiwara and Okamura found that the visual analogue scale (VAS) score, which was used to assess stress levels for each subject, significantly decreased after the humor intervention compared to the control (Ibid). This finding suggests that hearing laughter causes a greater increase in parasympathetic nervous activity. This activity is suppressed by the stress loading exercise but has the opposite effect with laughter. These results suggest that listening to laughter can bring about an alleviation effect on stress for humans. The researchers' conclusions are important because a "laughter session" where the subject simply listens to laughter can be performed without special knowledge, skills, or expense. Its flexibility to become adopted into any work environment could become a highly cost-effective treatment for people. Humor is shown here to produce a positive effect on stress relief like the previous studies, yet its relationship with the participant is

different. In this study, indirect engagement of humor was similarly useful in providing stress relief to subjects like the empirical studies on direct humor.

Previous studies discussed in this paper have dealt with stress relief as the physiological benefit that comes with humor. Stress can predispose humans to a multitude of unhealthy behaviors including lack of exercise and poor eating habits. Colom, like many in the public, believes it would be best to find ways to reduce the stress that affects the individual's physical health and quality of life (Colom et al., 2011). Although previous studies have yet to conclusively show what those specific effects are on our health, researchers carried out the experiment to find more answers. Colom's group aimed to measure stress levels after a comedy video condition and compared them with the control condition. Experimenters found that after the screening of the comedy video there was a highly significant reduction in anxiety levels (Ibid). This indicates that after participants had watched the comedy video, the reduction in anxiety levels was significant compared to the control group. Additionally, the results from this study support the hypothesis that the use of positive humor can serve as an effective coping strategy for reducing anxiety levels. The response that participants provided by using positive humor in the experiment to reduce anxiety levels is similar to previous studies. Colom and the other researchers in this present example provide another experiment that produced significant results linking humor and stress. Not only are they linked, but in response to all three aforementioned experiments, humor has been shown to benefit the subject in terms of heart rate, recollecting information, and anxiety levels. As researchers have suggested in their conclusions, there is significant evidence showing that humor can be used as a coping mechanism for anxiety, and more broadly stress. The next two

chapters will explore the relationship between using humor as a coping mechanism and the specifically stressed groups the subjects are in.

Chapter 2: The Effects of Humor on Historically Stressed Groups

After establishing the physiological benefits that humor can have on stressed humans, researchers looked at a different issue, mental health. Individuals with mental health issues are in all facets of the word a marginalized group. Aside from enduring psychological issues that the majority of people do not have to, their mental health status dictates a lot of the social situations in their life. As members of a particular minority where their perceptions of society can change drastically based on state of mind, their coping abilities for stress may be important in helping the individual stay safe.

Menéndez-Aller and the other experimenters in this study looked at whether there are differences in the use of humor depending on sex, age, location and education. They also explored the relationship between humor, optimism, depression, and anxiety. An additional goal was to improve the reliability found in previous studies. The results found correlations between the use of humor and the effect it has on participants (Menéndez-Aller et al., 2019). No matter if a person is optimistic or depressed, when they use humor frequently, it humor will help with that predisposition. The data also strengthened previous research on the relationships between humor and a stressful mental state (Ibid).

Menéndez-Aller and the other researchers suggested, with the results in mind, that it would be beneficial to add some sort of humor assessment to general psychological assessments. Such assessments could help therapists produce better techniques for patients to cope with stress. Furthermore, the researchers found past studies with patients with schizophrenia who demonstrated that humor training promoted resistance to stress (Ibid). Again, this training could form the foundations of teaching humor as a more vital social skill due to its benefits. This study is clear in showing the importance of

connecting humor and mental health through the studies presented. As humor is a dominant social characteristic, this is evidence that more attention should be paid to how it can be used.

Another group that bears a lot of stress are the parents of children with disabilities which can include mental health issues. These parents are known to experience greater stress and worse mental and physical health outcomes than do parents of typically developing children (Fritz, 2020). Parents of children with physical and mental disabilities have been seen to have health related problems with elevated chronic stress, similar to the relationship stress had on those with mental disorders. Previous research has identified some reasons for these differences, including having less time to exercise, sleep, or network socially (Ibid). Though Fritz's study (2020) did not recruit parents specifically, they believed the relations among caregivers would show such effects. Fritz had five goals he wanted to accomplish, but one of the most relevant goals was to examine whether the previously reported relations among humor styles and outcomes among samples may be stronger among a sample of individuals caregiving for a child with a disability. Fritz hoped this examination between the stressor of caregiving for a child with a disability might lay the groundwork for future work examining the effects of humor use on broader family functioning among those with children with disabilities (Ibid). Results on mental health showed that the self-enhancing humor was the style most strongly associated with beneficial outcomes including fewer depressive symptoms (Ibid). As the previous study also showed, depressive symptoms in subjects were relieved when they engaged in humor. Though the subjects were not explicitly tested for depression, it can be suggested that humor has a relieving effect on depressive symptoms

for those with or without depression. The implication would be that humor can be a treatment as well as a preventative measure for those with the potential to develop depression. The results also highlight that different humor styles were linked with both mental and physical well-being, including changes in caregivers' wellbeing over time (Ibid). The significantly positive relationships between health outcomes and the humor the caregiver applied to the stressor suggests that these treatments can be extended to other caregivers and parents as therapy. Equally, Fritz sees incorporating humor information and strategies into family interventions as a promising next step in this area. The parents with children with disabilities are the statistically stressed group, but caregivers are an appropriate representative for experimental trials as well. In line with previous researchers, Fritz also calls for the implementation of some humor practices among this group of people. As they face similar relationships and therefore stressors within their lives, studies explaining how their health outcomes can be better achieved are vital to the parent/caregiver as well as the child depending on them.

Just as the caregivers were presented with stress and found ways to cope, Roussi and three other psychologists (2007) aimed to study the relationship between the stress of breast cancer and the coping strategies used by the women diagnosed. Their tests measured coping level and the style used over time intervals of pre-surgery, post-surgery, and at the 3-month checkup after the surgery for their breast cancer. The team of researchers hypothesized that women who were engaged with the stressor at the pre-surgery time point, either through acceptance or through humor, would experience less distress 3 months after the operation, compared to women who did not make use of any of the coping strategies (Roussi et al., 2007). The results showed that pre-surgery and

post-surgery acceptance and humor were negatively related to distress. Only when experimenters got to the 3-month follow-up, that the other strategies like positive reinterpretation and self-distraction were also measured to be negatively related to distress, like acceptance and humor (Ibid). These findings by Roussi and her team indicate that when coping with breast cancer, women's use of acceptance and use of humor are negatively related to distress at all time intervals. The other strategies like the use of positive reinterpretation and the use of distraction were negatively related to distress at their 3 months interval. Results also showed that those two coping strategies, which were negatively related to distress, increased over time while the strategies positively related to distress, such as denial, decreased (Ibid). Not only was humor found to be a beneficial coping strategy for those going through a life-changing and stressful event, but the levels of usage among the group increased. This suggests, similarly to other groups, humor is an effective tool for this stressed group of people, yet the topic has not been met with the same importance by empirical studies. Another highly stressed group is using humor as a primary coping strategy and their use increases as time passes. Their use is not seen as reflexive or a single time occasion, humor is a long term useful coping strategy that can be employed in many stressful situations.

Another element of society that copes with stress are those coming to life's twilight. Individuals in old age are often seen as comical by the masses for their crassness and ignorance. However, their humor is not simply due to spontaneity or eccentric character. Humor can serve old people in similar ways to when one was younger. Positive humor, which can be described as non-harmful joking and banter, can help them cope with stressors and improve their social relationships (Berk, 2015). It is found especially

true if they laugh at themselves. Knowing this, Dr. Berk turned his focus to aging individuals as they confronted their own mortality. Berk wanted to explore the benefits of using humor as a coping method for dealing with the stress of aging. His study examined two populations from different generations, Traditionalists and Boomers, who were tackling the reality of aging and experiencing some stress making decisions in their daily life. Positive results were obtained from the groups and their use of humor as a coping strategy. When this group reframes their mindset around humor, it promotes a sense of control and superiority over the problem of aging (Ibid). In turn, this provides an alleviating effect on the old people's stress. Based on this, Berk believes that humor can change the frame of mind of aging people. The findings also show using humor can cultivate a playful attitude and that is important to the lives of old people. Berk's investigations into aging individual's relationship with stress and coping with humor are validated through its effects in making old people more resilient and more emotionally flexible. Additionally, the humor they already have is wasted if it is not used by the seniors (Ibid). This relates to how, although past evidence supported applying humor as a stress-reduction technique, individuals with high levels of humor should utilize it more often as they get better results overall. Again, this study is another example where, despite the empirically based benefits of humor and laughter, their application to the lives of certain groups of people are not well known. Like the women in the previous study confronted breast cancer, there was a similar threat to one's mortality among the old people in this study. In both instances humor was shown to provide beneficial effects on both subject group's stress. Furthermore, Berk, like many of the past researchers, believes that those benefits should be part of more widely accredited research and treatments

within the medical field. Though each of the groups formerly mentioned has their own stressor affecting their lives, humor is the connecting thread that has been a positive effect in each study.

The emergency services profession comprises select groups of individuals that have to face people going through traumatic events as well as their own life events on a daily basis. While the service workers receive training from highly skilled individuals on how to cope with traumatic events, humor is not always a specified strategy. Rowe and Regehr (2010) found recent studies that have paramedics ranked first in terms of negative impacts on physical health and second in terms of low job satisfaction. These negative effects seem to be occurring despite the focus on current coping strategies. This study highlights that there is an additional way emergency service professionals have been coping, humor. Popularized by crime shows and movies, each of the emergency service professions in the U.S. has developed its own colloquial language for joking about everyday encounters that only those within the profession would be able to understand. Rowe and Regehr explored the idea that humor is utilized by emergency personnel, and necessary to their profession (Ibid). With the backdrop of dealing with stressful life-and-death situations daily, service workers were recorded turning to dark humor as a method of venting their feelings. There was also evidence of men using humor to hide their feelings of anxiety in an effort not to appear weak to their colleagues (Ibid). In line with the framework suggesting that humor affects social perceptions, humor was also shown to elicit solidarity and the development of social support within a group. After the service individuals were tested, the use of black humor was reported to serve as a buffer to internalizing the patient's traumatic experiences (Ibid). The different service groups use

humor as a defense against the anxiety of the job and to create an emotional distance that protects them. This preservation of their mental state and emotions occurs as they are completing their work, so they do not lose concentration on the important tasks. Although the outcomes may not be as positive overall as the other studies, there is substantive evidence to support that humor acts as an effective coping mechanism for those in the emergency profession. Whether the humor is for venting or hiding, the data points to a significant relationship. In this example, humor was a technique used by the service groups even if it was not officially stated as such. As an already popular strategy, it would be advantageous for people to have a better understanding of how they should use humor to cope more effectively.

Nurses, as similarly found in the previous study, are considered a high work-stress group because of the heavy responsibility and workload that accompany the job. Fang and the other researchers (2019) were concerned about the relationship between hospital nurses' socio-demographic data, work stress, humor, and health status. All health professionals were provided a questionnaire that assessed those previously stated traits. After comparing data from the nurses, it was found that participants' health problems were positively associated with overall humor. Specifically, they saw a significant positive relationship between the categories of "humor attitude," "humor creativity," and "humor perception" with regards to the nurses' health problems (Fang et al., 2019). Fang's team of experimenters were able to gather results pointing to the beneficial effects of humor on a stressed group's health. The psychologists recommend that the growth of humor competency amongst nurses will aid in alleviating some of the work stress they go through. Unlike the defense mechanism seen by emergency service professionals as a

whole, nurses in this study have used humor in a healthier way to cope with work stress. Stressed groups are turning to humor as a coping method in regular situations as well as in empirically induced conditions. If that is due to desire or necessity remains to be seen, but in most of the studies the subjects are benefiting from their humor usage. The evidence suggests there is promise in the alleviating effects of humor on stress among statistically stressed groups.

Chapter 3: A Marginalized Group's Relationship with Humor and Coping

The previous two chapters have not only connected the use of humor and coping with stress, but they have found it among statistically stressed groups of people. In both, humor has been shown to provide rewarding results for those in experimental conditions as well as those statistically by the work they do. Another group that is stressed and marginalized within American society is the Black community. In connection to longstanding systemic racism in the U.S., Black Americans have been documented with chronic illnesses and disabilities rooted in health-risk factors associated with being poor (Simons et al., 2018). The economic disadvantage stresses Black people in different ways like unhealthy diet and lack of exercise. Many researchers and politicians have discounted this research by suggesting that increasing the socioeconomic status of Black Americans would help, however studies have shown otherwise. In reality, advanced education often leads to increased discrimination and race-related challenges (Ibid). In many cases, those highly educated Black people are often in companies as a greater minority than an average Black person would be in places more connected to their own communities, and this therefore can lead to more opportunities to be discriminated against. Further, the housing of wealthy Black people is still segregated. They are often regulated to neighborhoods and the neighboring health services that do not match their white counterparts. As such, higher class Black Americans still document high rates of chronic illness and disability (Ibid). The framework of the Simons study is the “weathering hypothesis” proposed by previous researchers, Geronimus and her colleagues. They viewed the elevated rates of illness and disability among Black Americans as a physiological response to the structural barriers and daily experience with

racism (Ibid). Simons wanted to validate those claims through another research study. Their team used the “weathering hypothesis” to hypothesize that the longitudinal data of Black participants will show racial discrimination’s significant effect on the subject’s health inflammation. The data was collected during seven separate periods of questioning spread over 18 years. Two groups, the adults and the juveniles, had their health recorded during each session. Results from the assessments of discrimination and segregation show that they are significantly related to adult inflammation at every questioning interval (Ibid). The data table also reveals that both juvenile and adult discrimination and segregation are significantly associated with adult inflammation (Ibid). In line with previous research, neither education nor income is related to inflammation, suggesting that increased socioeconomic status has no health advantage for their subjects. Additionally, these results indicate that the previous researcher’s “weathering hypothesis” is correct. Race-related stressors are more important predictors of the health of Black Americans than traditional factors like socioeconomic status. In Simons' study, the stressors of another marginalized group are significantly correlated with the stress they experience. While this was not about humor’s influence on coping, there is evidence showing the tangible effects of racism as a stressor on Black American’s health. Like previous studies have shown, stressed groups will look to cope with things like humor, but the effects have yet to be seen with this group. Racism, however, is not just another stressor, but a major stressor within the lives of Black Americans, so their effectiveness in coping could be dire.

With the detrimental health effects of racism as a stressor established, this next piece focuses on another group of Black people in a similar situation, Afro-Cubans.

Gosin (2017) interviewed participants on their ability to reject the racial stressors through the use of humor. She drew on previous scholars who emphasized the importance of humor as a coping technique and reasoned that the interviews with Afro-Cubans would show them using humor to combat the stereotypes associated with them. Though there were multiple subjects, the researcher provides two stories that encapsulated the pattern she noticed. The first was about Digna, an Afro-Cuban woman in Miami that was looking to get some help from a shopkeeper. Digna recounts a time shopping somewhere locally where everyone in the store looked to be Cuban and they were speaking Spanish to one another. However, when she got to the register, they started to address her in English instead. This racial assumption about Digna's identity is not met with anger or violence on her part. Instead, Digna entertains the conversation in English for some time before switching to Spanish. The trick surprises the shopkeeper as Digna adds in sarcastic questions to emphasize the other person's ignorance (Ibid). This person's interview highlights her efforts to use humor to counter moments where her racial identity as Afro-Cuban is rejected by other Cubans. The ease in ability to respond as such suggests this is not someone going through this situation for the first time. While it may not be a constant occurrence, the response to these microaggressions is common from her. In the second story provided by Gosin, humor is used more in the recounting of the story rather than at the exact time of the event. An Afro-Cuban man, Pedro, describes being at a predominately Latinx nightclub with friends. A couple of Mexican men start to harass the interviewee and his friends for being with Mexican women, which prompts them to simply leave the club. When they get outside, the drunk Mexican men start to get aggressive and a fight breaks out. Pedro, amid the altercation, starts speaking Spanish.

This is where Pedro says that the Mexican guys then realize why he is so “crazy” (Ibid). In this example, the facts of the matter were that Pedro was verbally abused and then physically assaulted by someone based on his race. Though Pedro won the fight and is safe, this can still be considered a hate crime. Additionally, while Pedro tells it in a cavalier manner, his story uses humor to recount a stressful racial encounter. Not only does he use humor, but Pedro uses the stereotype of Latinos being crazy as the punchline. Gosin reveals that instead of being a victim, Pedro felt good and laughed about how he put the Mexican men “back in their place” (Ibid). Pedro’s use of humor during the story can be seen as a coping mechanism for the racism that he encountered. Due to his jokes mirroring the same discrimination he received, it can be suggested that the humor is in response to the discrimination too. Both Digna and Pedro had instances where their identity was assumed and degraded. In a way to resist those stereotypes placed on them about their Blackness, interviewees used humor to take advantage of the assumptions people make about their racial/ethnic identity.

The next study attempts to establish, through empirical data, how people of different races use different coping mechanisms. Richman and her team (2011) were looking to see how coping responses moderate the extent to which health stressors, like drinking behaviors, are felt by participants. Researchers observed that racial minorities, notably African-Americans, produced a lower sense of control than Whites. Similarly to the article on the “weathering hypothesis,” the sense of control was present even after controlling for factors like socioeconomic status (Ibid). Psychologists hypothesized that this lack of control would influence the minority groups. The timeframe of the study was 10 years with eight waves of testing spread throughout. The longitudinal research

provided researchers with more data to make proper conclusions regarding the association between coping and drinking behavior. Results showed that researchers did observe patterns of differential coping techniques between racial/ethnic groups (Ibid). This suggests that there are broader differences in coping styles between ethnic groups. Richman's team found that humor as a coping mechanism was protective against binge drinking and drinking to intoxication for Black Americans. Additionally, humor was also predictive of decreased drinking among African-Americans (Ibid). This information supports Richman's hypotheses that coping techniques differ across ethnic groups and can predict or prevent detrimental drinking. Researchers suggested that humor be taken more seriously as a coping method, especially since minority groups are marginalized in society with less available resources. Studies showed that when minorities engage with ineffective coping methods, their drinking increases. If the specific coping techniques, like humor, were researched and utilized more often, this could potentially lead to better health outcomes for the groups of people.

Previous psychologists have tested the effects of humor in experiments as well as compiling a number of anecdotal claims for a similar relationship with humor. Vereen's team of researchers (2006) now looked to establish connections in the counseling realm. As humor has operated as a coping mechanism in past studies, the present investigation was based on the effectiveness of using humor when counseling African American college students. The authors established that there is a long history connecting humor to the African American experience in the U.S. One of the earliest examples is how Black people used humor to aid in comic relief from the cruelty they faced as slaves (Vereen et al., 2006). When newly freed Black people begin migrating to Northern states, they also

used humor to cope with the racism and discrimination (Ibid). Lastly, in more contemporary times, humor, socially or politically, has been a way to vent anger and aggression over racial transgressions (Ibid). With the historical influences of humor defined, Vereen turned to the literature on counseling specifically. He finds that a study by Maples and their team presented the idea that counselors must be aware of how their culture and the client's culture influences the use of humor in the therapeutic setting. As numerous African American students attend predominantly White institutions for the first time in their lives, this population requires different interventions to meet many of the same needs that other non-Black students have (Ibid). The awareness in cultural differences would be extremely helpful for those navigating the college scene. The purpose of their study was to investigate how humor can help connect those in counseling better. Maples and their team observed that the use of humor in the counseling setting serves to enhance oral expression and is an evaluation of both the self and the wider world (Ibid). The increased quality of therapy sessions suggests that participants are responding positively to humor. Therapists with better communication from their clients would help them diagnose and treat more effectively. However, for the humor to be successful the counselor has to be culturally sensitive to the student to properly assess their behaviors and emotions (Ibid). This is based on the second half of the finding that says that humor also acts as an evaluation. If the therapist is not sensitive to certain cultural factors, the client can be adversely affected by the humor. Alternatively, Vereen believes that effective humor significantly impacts the relationship between the two, which allows the student to view the counselor as an ally in an environment that historically has been perceived as isolating and uninviting (Ibid). Vereen and his

researchers found valid evidence from literature on the counseling effects that humor can have specifically on African-Americans.

While Black people in the United States experience a unique form of racism based on the country's own history, anti-blackness is prevalent globally. As such, studies on race within a country like the U.K. could contribute to benefits found in the U.S. Reid (2015) evaluated the implications of race in everyday life. She presents multiple examples, but her most relevant details how humor presents itself with schools. She describes examples of the humor that exist amongst the children. One of them is called banter. Reid finds that the laughter from banter produces comradery as well as an acknowledgement of the social harmony that brings the students together (Reid, 2015). The school, like many in the world, was home to differences amongst students' socioeconomic status, religion, and race. In their local society, there is a status hierarchy and attributes that are associated with each that the children learn growing up. Reid laid out that it was common among the students to hear them talking about ethnic and racial identifiers, especially in the form of banter. Banter provides a way for students to explore those definitions for themselves as well as a tool of unification and bonding. The students reported that their banter is a way to 'make fun' out of differences. While discrimination and certain political structures have solidified power relationships in society, as school children, they are more flexible in their ability to turn their differences into a positive (Ibid). Much like the Afro-Cubans used humor in response to racial situations, this evidence suggests that this type of humor is also a coping technique. However, as this pattern was found in a London school, this suggests that the humor coping is something that is developed from childhood. The children are aware of these differences at a young

age, but they use it to create friendship. It can be speculated for several reasons why the response turns more hostile, but while young, it can still be a relatively harmless yet effective technique. The combination of evidence has led investigators, including Reid, to call on more research on the effects of humor with regards to racial minorities.

As the literature on counseling effects was examined in the previous articles, there is also literature on humor as a communications study that researchers have investigated as well. Rossing (2012) used works from Stephen Colbert, an accredited American Comedian, to show the implicit critiques on post-racialism. The author sees humor as a way to counter the consequences of supporting post-racial ideologies (Rossing, 2012). These ideas rest on the premise that racism, though real, is not a current issue for racial minorities. While the humor in this piece is performed by a White person, its content responds to similar experiences of racism just from a different perspective. Instead of a racial minority using humor to critique, this is a person in the racial majority pointing to similar instances of racism in present society. Racial conversations are often seen as being difficult, but Colbert's jokes can offer a way to engage that is not as aggressive. Rossing believes it is important to acknowledge racial humor as a popular site of racial discourse that can uplift minority's grievances (Ibid). This particular type of humor provides a foundation to initiate reflection and more serious discourse from opposing sides. And despite the focus not being on the advantages of coping with humor, it does provide another example where the use of humor to talk about racial experiences is found to be a beneficial resource.

Conclusion

In sum, the multitude of evidence presented supports that humor is effective in coping with stress. Whether looking at experiments with humor cues, anecdotes on racism, or comparing levels of chronic anxiety, stress is alleviated by the use of humor. The first chapter aimed to establish development of humor both independently as well as when connected to relieving stress. The two following chapters served to build on that foundation by specifying the group using humor to alleviate stress. In the second chapter, the coping effect on stress was seen with medical professionals and parents with children with disabilities. Since these groups were found to be significantly stressed, the results showing the effect should be further investigated. Moreover, the third chapter looked at a similar relationship, but the group was a racial minority of U.S society. In common with previous results, humor was an effective tool for Black people experiencing the stress of racism. Though humor is not revered as a proven coping technique, it is widely being used as such. In certain cases, like the emergency medical professionals, the effect may be positive, but the relationship with humor is unhealthy. Further investigations into the ways to engage with humor would help distinguish the healthiness of the behaviors. Additionally, as seen by the third chapter, racial minorities have a significant relationship with humor that stretches over many decades. Examining their connection to humor could be vital in improving their conditions in the ways that socioeconomic status falls short of.

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